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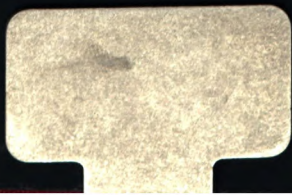
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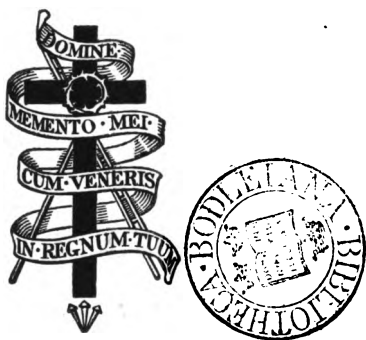
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# *IERNE OF ARMORICA.*

A TALE OF THE TIME OF CHLOVIS.

BY

J. C. BATEMAN.



LONDON:  
BURNS AND OATES, PORTMAN STREET  
AND PATERNOSTER ROW.

1873.

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## CHAPTER I.

### *The Cave of Council.*

THE sun had persistently remained all day behind the dull grey canopy overspreading the sky. Snowflakes were beginning to fall, drifted as soon as they reached the ground by the icy wind whistling through the trunks of the majestic oaks growing in this part of the forest. It was a drear winter scene, by no means enlivened by the sombre figures of two men walking to and fro, now in silence, anon engaged in low but earnest conversation. From the lips of the taller of the two broke out at intervals words of wrath and scorn ; then again he spoke low, almost mournfully. To see him as he was there, no one could have recognized him at the first glance for the same person who only a week past, clad in the august robes of an Arch Druid, slew with his own hands, and afterwards burned on the high altar deep in the recesses of the forest, the man who, unfaithful to his trust, had suffered to be snatched from his safe conduct the young and beautiful Armorican Princess he was conveying to a great festival to be held in this part of the country. His crime had also been aggravated in the eyes of his leaders by the fact that the aggressors were a marauding band of Franks, the inveterate enemies of the Armoricans, who were pillaging and ravaging the frontiers at the time, in revenge, they said, for depredations committed by the Armoricans on the Gauls, a people the Franks had undertaken to protect. Sombre and stern as the winter day, now fast fading into night, was his dress. His tunic, falling below the knee in thick plaits, was of close brown woollen serge, as were also the *braches*, or trowsers, gathered round the ankle, where they met the untanned

leather boots covering his feet. A bear skin was drawn tightly over his breast and shoulders, and clasped round his waist by a leathern belt, buckled by a broad silver agrafe, or fastening, curiously engraved. To this belt hung a short sword and a long keen glittering knife, buried for the moment in its sheath. On his head was a sort of helmet of black leather, devoid of any ornament, low in shape like a skull cap, and surmounted by a metal spike. His brawny arms were bare, and clasped at the wrist and upper part of the arm with broad silver armillas, engraved, as was the buckle of his belt, with sacred runes. Nothing could have betrayed him to be the same man, save his proud bearing, his unquailing eye, his broad forehead apparently as hard and immovable as the rocks, rising here and there among the oaks in huge masses of grey phantomlike shapes. Those who had once encountered the calm searching look of that eye, had once gazed on that inflexible forehead, on that stern countenance, could not easily forget it, or fail to recognize it, even under such a disguise as he now wore. His companion, not so tall and seemingly much younger than himself, was clad in the same costume, that of a common Armorican warrior; and though his look was less imperious, his face less striking, it was yet not less regal in character. The eyes of both turned inquiringly, as they now and then halted in their walk, towards the spot where a path wound away to some unseen depths of the forest, indicating as much as their words at such times, that they were awaiting the appearance of a third person. As they resumed their walk, the conversation, interrupted by these halts, continued, sometimes in the deep tones of the elder of the two, then again in the remonstrating and soothing voice of the younger.

‘It may not be, O Budik,’ his companion would reply to these friendly efforts. ‘I am heavy in spirit to-night. That power which thou knowest I may not resist is upon me, impelling me to see what I would fain hide from myself. This mischance is but the beginning of the end. I may not hide it from thee, O royal scion of a royal line. The loss of Iërne is more to us than the loss of the daughter of kings, of the pure

Priestess of the dread altar of her whose awful veil no mortal has yet withdrawn. It is not the capture of Iërne, consecrated to the dread invisible powers, but the capture of that which she symbolizes to us, even our pure and ancient worship. This last mischance was alone wanting to show it to me—to call forth in me the spirit of prophecy, which foretells the approaching end, the inevitable ruin of our race. That race which once covered the earth with the luxuriance of its oak forests, the power of its dread altars, is now driven into this remote corner, a morass, all but the sea which thunders upon its engirding rocks. Even from the island of the greater Britain, till now deemed the impregnable stronghold of our race, that race whose high spirit even the Roman invader could not tame nor corrupt with his apostate teaching—even now from thence are our people driven hither by the sword of the Saxon dyed deep in the blood of our doomed brethren. They fall back on these shores, even as thou didst eighteen years ago, to be again encountered by the spirit of invasion and extermination. Here it is the Frank wolves driving us back into our inaccessible fastnesses, the heralds of a new state of things, heralds of our doom, and of the triumph of that new worship advancing gradually behind their shields. Seest thou not the worship of the Crucified One creeping on by slow but certain steps from the East, overspreading the earth on all sides, raising as a standard for all men the Cross on which a God is nailed? What does it all say to us but one thing, that we, our race, our ancient worship, are passing from the face of the earth, where even the remembrance of us will be no more known? What was it but a dream that I should hope to restore our race to its lost power, our ancient worship to its pristine splendour, when the sacred oak forests resounded to the solemn mystic hymn of the Druid, and everywhere the stone altars of the Highest Perfection were flooded with the blood of the imperfect?’

‘Did not I know, O Gwench’lan, that the sacred inspiration of a bard is upon thee,’ interposed the young King of Armorica, ‘and that at such times thou must utter the thought which swells thy breast, urged by a power over which thou



hast no control, I should marvel to hear such words of despair from lips which have never yet breathed but words of defiance to the Christians, never threatened aught but vengeance to the foes of our race.'

'Were I but an impostor, Budik, a false prophet, I should prophesy falsely, and say, Peace! where there is no peace. But thou knowest that I cannot, if I would, blind my eyes to the inevitable. And to no one but thee, O brother of the sacred Inner Circle, would I breathe such words—none but thou must hear them, and know what is coming upon us, as sure as the night is now closing us round. Now is to be verified the mystic prophecy of the divine Merlin—"Now doth the red dragon chase the white from the borders of the dried up lake, the dried up lake no more to be filled with living waters. Now are three eggs hatched in the nest, out of which come the fox, the bear, and the wolf. The wolf ravins; his howls fill the air; at his roar all the towers of the isle tremble; so strong is the breath of his nostrils, that it shrouds in vapour the whole breadth of the land. The giant of iniquity arms; that giant whose look shall freeze the world with fear."<sup>1</sup> It is over; it is gone! No more shall it be, "Heart for eye, head for hand, death for wound, in the valley as on the mountains, three for one, day and night, till the valley is filled with blood. O land of the white sea Dragon, O pure white Ermine, O Armorica! O worship of the great<sup>2</sup> Pendragon, O Arthur, O King of the mystic ring! O warrior of the flashing sword! no more shall thy armies cover the mountains, no more the sounding steps of thy innumerable hosts shake the forest, freeze with terror the hearts of thy enemies."<sup>3</sup> The fire of the high altar pales before the rays issuing from the crown of glory round the head of the Crucified One! The rainbow fades! our glory is turned into night; our race passes away; and<sup>4</sup> we return, we return, we return no more!'

<sup>1</sup> Merlin's prophecy. See Michelet, *Hist. de France*.

<sup>2</sup> Head of the serpent.

<sup>3</sup> De Villemarques, *Chants de la Bretagne*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Cha till, cha till, cha till sin tulle.'

Budik looked in the face of his companion. There was yet enough light for him to see the rapt look of his eyes, gazing, as it were, into the unseen, and he knew the power of divination was upon him, and that till that power left him, he must speak its dictates. He shuddered as he listened, for, in his double capacity as High Priest and King, he knew that the words of the inspired bard would inevitably come to pass. It was, indeed, death to all his hopes for the country to which he had devoted his life, yet he could not but listen, he was compelled to listen, however unwillingly. In spite of his own knowledge as a brother of the Inner Circle, he hoped the ruin now foretold might not be in his own day; and he waited with patience that Gwench'lan should awake from his trance, during which, as Budik well knew, the bard had neither power nor will of his own. Once awake, he might once again call to vengeance, perhaps to success, if some propitious circumstance could but avert the impending doom. If not, and the night was really about to fall on them, then let it come; let it be ruin, a ruin in which might haply be engulfed the destroyer with themselves!

He had not long to wait. A short silence followed the last words Gwench'lan had uttered in a solemn mournful chant. Then, rousing himself from the mood which had seemed to pass so strangely across his spirit, he said in a very different tone—

‘The present is our own, Budik; there is yet time for us to accomplish a work which, even if it be the expiring efforts of a once mighty race now passing from the earth, shall yet make those who come after us tremble at its remembrance. Something must be done to restore the confidence of the people, overwhelmed as they are with this untoward event, the capture of the Princess. Not even the swift vengeance which overtook the traitor Kæris is sufficient; it must be something more signal yet. Ierne must be here for Æstre; for the Festival of the Vernal Equinox! She shall! By the dread Triune King have I sworn it! Out of the heart and centre of the power of this vile Frank wolf will I tear her, and the people shall see

her again when the *Œstre* rites are performed, the mysterious celebration of the *Neue-braithe*, when the *Neuroz* springs again into life, unfolding the beauty of its crimson heart to the lifegiving rays of divine light. Enabled by my knowledge of all past things, I have given Alan Fergan, whose return we await here, certain indications which have led him to a discovery which will, I trust, enable me to seize *Iërne*, even in the midst of *Soissons*, to which city they have carried her, from beneath the very shadow of the Frank guard. I waited to know with what success he met before I spoke of his mission to thee, who art always first, often the only one, to know my plans. Presently thou shalt listen to his report. *Morna*, his companion, is returned with a message announcing his success, which makes the plan I meditate not impracticable. It certainly will be no child's play to carry it into effect, and, therefore, I shall undertake it myself. It is a plan which will bring terror to the heart of the Frank, when he will learn that there is a power, mysterious in its workings, which he can neither foresee nor prevent. After the accomplishment of this plan, we will think of signal vengeance. Blood must wash out the stain of this treachery.'

'How didst thou find out where they had carried the noble maiden? I deemed her lost to us for ever—doubly lost—knowing the brutal nature of the man who had carried her off.'

'The faithful *Morna* followed the ravishers. He was not far from her when he saw her transferred to the guard that was to convey her to *Soissons*. There she is now, no longer under the guard of the brutal *Siegbert*, King of *Ripuar*, but safe in a refuge consecrated to the shelter of noble maidens. How my spirit chafed within me when my trusty *Morna* told me how the Frank wolf gazed with impure eyes on her virginal beauty! I marvel the man *Chlovis* should have transferred the guard of his captive to such an animal as that *Ripuar*. Under the guard of the *Sicambrian*, she would have been spared these indignities, have been respected as a captive to be ransomed. I have never yet heard *Chlovis* taxed with the brutal propensities of his cousin, *Siegbert* of *Cologne*. But I must speed me

in my undertaking, if I would save her from a yet worse taint than these. Unless I rescue her soon, the proselytizing efforts of her present keepers may inflict a greater stain on her soul.'

'Who are her present keepers? and what is this refuge of which thou speakest?'

'They call it the sacred House of Refuge, and her keepers are the consecrated maidens who rule that house, teachers of the worship of the Crucified, One Whose baleful influence they are ever seeking to extend. How can I tell but that with their endeavours to instil their pernicious doctrines into her pure mind, they may not perchance awaken there some dormant predilection for that faith, confessed by the apostate parents she never knew? It has been matter of much difficulty to prevent the knowledge of her origin coming to her ears. It was policy to seal in death the lips of the woman who, flying the massacre of that royal house, was cast upon these shores with her, a wailing infant, in her arms, now eighteen years ago. Thou must remember her arrival, though thou thyself wert but a boy of ten in those days, thyself also a fugitive.'

'Well do I remember that dread exodus. I see, even now, the clasped hands of the despairing fugitives, their scared looks, as if they still gazed on the scene of blood and fire; they had barely escaped with their lives. A repetition it was of the flight which gave me, years before, to thy fatherly protection.'

'It was, my son. For eighteen years have I trained her noble mind in the deep mysteries of our ancient lore. It was not till after long persuasion that I conquered her repugnance to the service of an altar, on which it was necessary, for the well being of man, that man's blood should flow. And now, just as she had voluntarily put on the white robes of a priestess, and bound the mystic garland round her brow, she is snatched away from us. But she shall return, if it be only to show the Frank how I defy his power, and dare him to thwart aught I propose to myself.'

'Would thou hadst intrusted her to my protection on that journey! I would have defended her with my life!'

‘Would that I had, Budik ; for thou art no craven to quail before the onset of the Frank wolf, however fiery it may be. What a craven he was, that Kæris ! He would have screamed as the sacrificial knife descended in swift vengeance to let out his traitor blood, but that I put my hand on his mouth and stifled his cries. Guilt makes cowards of the bravest, and I was certain, by that sign, that the wily Frank had bought his soul, and cajoled him by gold to betray his trust. He must have sent word to that wolf, Chlovis, which road the escort would take, else he could never have surprised it.’

‘Why didst thou mistrust me?’ asked the young King of Armorica, with a tone of affectionate reproach. ‘Surely thou didst not fear that I should forget my oath to stifle my earthly passion for the beautiful Iërne?—that oath which I voluntarily offered before the dread altar of the thrice Holy One, the moment that I learnt from thy lips that the royal maiden was consecrated from her infancy to the service of that supreme altar? Surely thou didst not hesitate to trust her to my protection, lest the temptation should prove too great for my youth, and I should be tempted to overstep the bounds of the pure worship and love I have vowed to her now, who is to me as sacred and as dear as my own country and her altars, whose unsullied purity is in my sight as the welfare of Armorica? Is not the splendour of our ancient worship bound up in her glorious beauty and spotless purity?’

A deprecating pressure of the hand from Gwench’lan was the sole response he made to the earnest remonstrance of his young friend. At that moment a third person joined them, emerging from the wood and descending the path towards them. Budik gave a slight start when he first caught sight of the Gaulish costume of the new comer, but the calm smile on Gwench’lan’s lips soon reassured him, and gave him to understand that this person was the very man for whom he waited.

‘Welcome, my faithful Fergan,’ was the salutation he received from Gwench’lan. ‘Thou hast used despatch in thy return. Lead on to this place of shelter thou didst tell Morna

to prepare for thy coming and our secret conference on thy mission. Not only is this spot too public for thy report, but it is none of the most pleasant this weather, even to the iron frame of a well seasoned Armorican.'

'Follow me, and we shall soon be in its friendly shelter,' said the new comer, equal in the hierarchy of Armorica to either of the other two, although Gwench'lan was the acknowledged head, as he was the ruling spirit of the entire movement then taking place in that country. 'Behold,' he said, as he led them on a few steps, and they confronted a huge grey rock overgrown with moss and hanging creepers, pointing as he spoke to some strange hieroglyphics engraved on its surface.

'I see,' said Gwench'lan, and pressing his fingers closely on the stone it yielded slowly, turning smoothly and without noise, as it were on hinges, disclosing a passage, into which the three men entered.

Closing the stone door after them, Gwench'lan followed his companions down a winding passage, till the glimmer of a fire appeared in the inside of a small vault or cave. Some seats, heaped up with dry moss, offered a rest, as welcome to these men as the warmth of a recess, thus fashioned in the solid rock and cunningly concealed from common observation. Here a fourth person was awaiting their arrival, engaged in feeding the fire in a small brazier. This was Morna, another member of the sacred Inner Circle, none of less rank and science being permitted to know of, much less visit, caves of this kind, where some of the most important schemes were devised, the most sacred and secret conferences held.

'How hast thou sped, Fergan?' asked Gwench'lan, as soon as they were seated. 'Morna tells me thou hadst some difficulty in finding the sacred characters on the wall, which those half witted Gauls have called the wall of Cæsar. The southern entrance was not so difficult to find?'

'No, not after the directions thou didst give me so accurately. By the awful veil of the dread Unseen, I would I possessed such lore as thine, Gwench'lan, which enabled thee to describe so accurately a spot thou hadst never seen. It

was by the three ash trees<sup>5</sup> that I discovered the engraved stone. My disguise as a medicine man gave me ample excuse for haunting a spot where I might expect to find the divine herb, the selago, of healing property. How were any to know that it grew in hedges, not in fields, or that had I found it I had not dared to gather it in such a garb, unprepared either by ablution or the mystic offering of bread and wine? The stone is in a direct line with those trees. It is in the wall built against the high bank of the field through which the secret passage runs, about ten yards lower down the road than the garden gate of the house where our illustrious Priestess lies a captive, and a hundred yards beyond the eastern station of the city guard. If I be not mistaken, the masonry of the opening once sapped from behind, it were easy to throw it down at the last moment, and lay bare the entrance to the cavern, through which we may hurry with the rescued captive, and escaping through the passage, reach the south entrance and gain the Paris road with the greatest expedition.'

'I had scarcely dared to hope,' said Gwench'lan, 'thy researches would meet with such complete success. It is a fortunate chance that this masked entrance should be so near the postern gate of the garden of the House of Refuge. We might, as thou sayest, with caution and despatch, effect a rescue that will somewhat startle them in their fancied security. But continue thy report, Fergan.'

'I then directed my steps towards the three ash trees, which I had noticed in the distance in the field beyond the wall. As I drew nearer I found they were planted exactly in the triangular form thou saidst, to mark the northern entrance of the secret passage beneath, and the proximity of the south entrance. Though of large growth, they were a mere ruin with age and decay, and stood a few steps from the brink of a cliff of some height, steep, and in some places perpendicular. Descending cautiously, I found myself in a lonely valley, surrounded by the cliff on all sides save one, which opened on to what I afterwards found was the highroad to Chalons.'

<sup>5</sup> Mallet, *North. Antiq.* n. 490; Virgil, *Georgics*.

‘That road,’ said Gwench’lan, ‘was made by the Roman invaders, but such walls of massive masonry could only be raised by men of our ancient race, not for defence against the enemy, but for the furtherance of our mysterious and sacred rites. In some, these passages would be found to lead to a large vaulted chamber, with outer and inner sanctuaries—the inner one containing the high altar of the sublime Triune God. An opening into this inner sanctuary would be so contrived in the field above, that on the recurrence of the summer solstice, the rays of the sun would penetrate those unseen depths at midday, and every full moon shed her radiance on that holy throne. Thou didst not find such a secret chamber, Fergan?’

‘No; what I might have found by closer search I could not say, but everything else I found as you described.’

‘Continue thy report, Fergan,’ said Gwench’lan to him.

‘Having counted eight and twenty steps from the three ash trees in a straight line, I found myself at the end of a small winding, rising up towards the face of the cliff. I ought to have mentioned that in this valley is a clear smooth lake of some size. It is a secluded spot, nor heard I any sound in it whilst I was there save the wail of the bittern or the scream of the eagle, as it winged its way to its eyrie in the cliffs rising beyond this valley.’

‘It was there thou didst find the west-entrance?’ said Gwench’lan.

‘Yes; the path led me directly to it. It is about ten feet above the foot of the cliff—a large cavern tenanted by bats, its entrance cunningly contrived between rocks and bushes. I discovered it with difficulty, and the bronze gate which closed it fell at my first touch. Evidently the damp of ages had destroyed its supports and hinges.’

‘Aye, the damp of ages,’ repeated Gwench’lan, in a low and mournful tone, as he sat listening apparently unmoved to a report which carried his spirit back into ages when the pomp and power of his race was in its prime. It was with feelings of melancholy interest that he listened to details revealing the



handiwork of the ancestors he revered, now so utterly a thing of the past that even he, with his deep science of that ancient sacred lore, could scarcely have expected to find his predictions so completely realized.

‘I entered this passage,’ continued Fergan, finding that Gwench’lan said no more; ‘it had high smooth walls, and a floor of soft shifting sand. Having followed it far enough, I struck a light, without fear of attracting attention to my movements, and continued my explorations. I had gone about two hundred yards, when I came to what seemed, at first sight, an end to that passage. On closer inspection, I found a mark on it, which at once decided me to use pressure against it. After a little time, it gave way, proving to be an outlet, by a turning stone, into another passage crossing at right angles the one I had just passed through.’

‘Thou mightest, on close inspection of the wall directly opposite, have found the entrance to the other arm of the cross passage, and have passed from thence into the inmost sanctuary. What thou hast done, however, is more to our purpose.’

‘As I knew that the engraved stone in the wall, said to be of Cæsar, lay on my right hand, I followed this new passage in that direction, and arrived at another gate, also of bronze, closed like the former, but standing firmly, supported by bolt and hinge. This gate did not yield in any way to my efforts to open it. Projecting my light through the bars as far as I could, I saw that a sort of cavern existed beyond, like that at the other end. I continued my examination for some time, undisturbed by bats or any living creature, another testimony to the fact that there was no exit that way into the open air. I noticed, however, faint glimmerings of light in the roof of the vault, which I concluded were apertures for the admission of fresh air from above; a circumstance which would account for my having been able to penetrate so far underground without inconvenience to myself or flickering of my light.’

‘There would be concealed air openings all along the roof of the passage; though I marvel they have not been long since choked up,’ observed the chief of the party.

‘As I could make no farther discovery in this direction,’ continued Alan Fergan, ‘I returned on my steps, and re-descended the passage. Resolving not to return through the outlet which I had left open, I followed the cross passage in its length, and arrived, by a shorter passage than that I traversed at first, opposite an opening, low down in the cliff, so much overgrown with bushes that I thought it best not to attempt to force my way through. Opening as it did, upon a highroad, it would have been unwise to call any attention to it by disturbing the overgrowth which concealed it.’

‘Wisely resolved, Fergan,’ observed his chief. ‘The entrance from the valley seems to be the one that will suit our purpose. What plan didst thou think might best enable us to profit by thy discoveries?’

‘Some of us should return at once with tools to open this second gate. We might then proceed with careful labour to sap the wall inside the cavern, and open the way to the postern gate of the House of Refuge.’

‘Didst thou say there was a garden attached to the house, Fergan?’ asked Gwench’lan.

‘Yes; and I know for certain that the inmates of the house walk at stated times in this garden; always in the morning, unless the weather be most unfavourable. Once or twice they have come out in the afternoon when it has been bright. I saw them several times as I stood in the field above the wall, and, but for a thick belt of trees in the garden, which, bare of foliage as they are, masked it in part from the eyes of an intruder, I might perhaps have recognized her we have lost. Still it might have been difficult to distinguish her, there being no difference in the dress, save the black veils of some and the white veils, of the neophytes, I suppose.’

‘By the dread altar of the Invisible and All Powerful, I see it!’ said Gwench’lan, after a pause in which he appeared to meditate deeply. ‘If the entrance through the wall is beyond that bronze gate, the rescue is easier than I had believed it possible. Dost thou see it, Budik?’

‘Partly,’ replied the young King of Armorica. ‘We must

watch for an opportunity by which she can be brought out by the postern gate of the garden, and carried off through the secret passage to the valley, where there will be a party waiting with horses. I fear that from her ignorance of our design she will not be able to give us much aid.'

'Perchance,' said Gwench'lan, who anticipated no reluctance to her rescue on the part of the captive, 'it should be our care to carry out our intentions suddenly and without her knowledge. Were she aware of our movements, she might in her anxiety of hope and fear, rouse those suspicions which might defeat our designs. Is that cavern in the valley large enough to hold three or four horses?'

'Doubtless, and more if required.'

'Tis well,' said Gwench'lan. 'It is now my task to select those who may join us in this expedition. Both Fergan and Morna must be with us. Morven might be trusted were he once aware of the importance of prudence and obedience.'

'If he is not to be ruled into complete submission in a case like this,' said Morna, who had hitherto listened in silence, 'where there can be but one head, and all the rest members to obey that head, it were best he should atone for such self-worship with his blood on the supreme altar of sacrifice. If he forget not himself and remember but the duty intrusted to him, he is not of much use in this life, nor fitted to enjoy the felicities of that life where we are once more blended into the one all pervading Spirit, filling all time and space.'

'Thou art right, Morna! such is the teaching of our ancient sacred lore. An I but find one more fitted for my purpose I will not take him. Would,' continued Gwench'lan, 'some chance could happen to call this Sicambrian vagrant to a distance on some plundering or marauding expedition, as is his wont, over the eastern or northern frontier.'

'Such a chance is more than probable,' observed Morna. 'Whilst Fergan was yet busied in his search, I noticed a great stir in the city of Soissons. Single horsemen were galloping out of the town in all directions, as if on urgent business. There was a clank as of armourer's anvils, a hurrying to and fro. Before

I left, small bodies of armed men rode into the town, singing what I took to be battle songs of their nations. Methought it savoured somewhat of some warlike expedition in hand.'

'The invisible powers are with us,' exclaimed Gwench'lan. 'To-morrow we start, if the omens are auspicious. Let us go now, Budik, we have yet many matters to accomplish.' So saying, he rose from his mossy seat, and tightening his sword belt, he left the cave, followed by the young King, Morna closing the stone outlet through which they emerged into the forest.

## CHAPTER II.

### *In the Convent Garden.*

IT was as Alan Fergan had surmised. Chlovis was absent from Soissons. He had suddenly received the proposal of an alliance of defence with Gundovald, King of the Edui, and had started at once on the duty required of him, the chastisement of the Alemanni, who had attacked and devastated the Eduan settlement of the peaceful salt curers on the banks of the Sala. They had retired hitherto unmolested, deriding the Burgundians, or dwellers in burgs, as they tauntingly called their victims, whose dead bodies strewed the banks of the river, late scene of their profitable industry. This alliance was worth more to Chlovis than the mere booty allotted to him and his followers for their military service, or the further pay the Eduan King had promised. It entered into his policy to cement an alliance with his powerful neighbour, an alliance he had vainly sought to establish by the offer in marriage of his sister Llantildis to Sigismund, son of this Gundovald. It was, therefore, with a feeling of exultation he could hardly repress, that he had received the proposals of this alliance of defence from the very man who had scorned his proffered advances, and rejected his sister as his daughter-in-law.

This alliance was no less a matter of fervent thanksgiving to the venerable Remigius, Archbishop of Rheims. Messengers, devout and pious ecclesiastics, had long been passing to and fro between him and the holy Avitus, Archbishop of Vienne, accredited with full powers to forward so desirable a result. Two of these messengers, the holy Lupus and the pious Vedast, were present at Vienne when the disastrous news from the banks of the Sala had reached the palace of Gundovald.

Although this King was an Arian, in common with all his people, he sent at once for the Catholic Archbishop of Vienne, whom he had always found his best adviser in his various dilemmas. The holy Avitus strongly advised him to form an instant alliance with Chlovis, a thing hitherto repugnant to Gundovald, who dreaded the energy and ambition of his enterprising neighbour. The messengers were therefore sent back at once with the proposed treaty, by which Chlovis would be bound to defend, but not encroach on, the north east frontier of Burgundy.

With the prescience inspired by the result of keen observation, his vast knowledge both of past and present events, the holy Remigius foresaw the time when the heathen Frank would be firmly seated in the room of the Catholic Roman. It became then his earnest thought to avert the danger in which such a change might involve the Catholic Church, that of being swamped in the tide of heathen conquest, and to use his best efforts to achieve the conversion of the Frank Chlovis, whose zeal for the Church, and great esteem for her servants, were so well known. From his knowledge of the reverence entertained by the Franks for woman, of their submissiveness to her influence—female beauty being with them an inspiration from the gods—he saw the realization of his anxious prayers in the marriage of the great Chlovis with the beautiful Chlotildis, daughter of Chilperic, King of Vienne, whom Gundovald had murdered, with all his family, except two daughters, still infants, whom he had saved at the instant prayers of the venerable Avitus. To this Prelate, Gundovald had delivered the royal infants, with the stern decree that they should be immediately immured in the Convent of our Lady at Geneva, and the condition that he should hear no more of them, save that, at the allotted age, they had taken the irrevocable vows of the black veil. His commands, in the case of the elder Eduan Princess, had already been obeyed, and she was, even then, for ever far beyond the desires and aspirations of a world in which she yet breathed. The younger one, the lovely Chlotildis, the pious Catholic Princess, was still free from all trammelling vows,

though the period for her profession was past, being again and again delayed by the influence of the holy Avitus, in furtherance of the views of the Archbishop Remigius. The period had now arrived when these two pillars of the Catholic Church in Gaul judged all things ripe for the accomplishment of this propitious marriage, and every step was now taken to forward it.

The exultation of the Franks, followers of Chlovis, was equal to that of their leader, when the signal was given to arm for the chastisement of the Alemanni. The previous deliberation at the Mallum, to which they had been hastily convened, to consider the articles of the treaty, had been unanimously terminated in an instant acceptance of them all, and the assembled warriors dispersed to their several quarters to arm and prepare for immediate departure.

‘Hurrah!’ they shouted as they left the Mallum. ‘Hurrah for the battlefield, for the chain of valour! Hurrah for the combat! the battle which the freemen loves! Hurrah for the bath of blood! the shock of bucklers! the hail of Odin! the feast of the corpse-pecking eagle! If we fall on the battlefield, we march straight to the halls of Valhalla! There we shall enter in the glittering array of arms! There shall we eat the flesh of the boar Sæhrimmer, never consumed. There shall we drink out of curved horns ever filled, the everlasting mead, poured out by the maidens whose beauty and youth are ever renewed. Happy he who dies the death of a warrior! Death on the battlefield to be the chosen one of the beloved Valkyrior!’

These and similar songs, chanted as they armed or passed to and fro to their gathering places, were answered by shouts and battle cries, ringing through the streets of Soissons, whilst a spirit-stirring call to battle echoed from the trumpets and martial music in the courtyard of the palace, heard far out in the country by the approaching warriors from a distance, filling their breasts with that warlike enthusiasm which had borne them in resistless triumph over so many battlefields. At last, all was ready. The banners of the different chiefs were raised, the troops filed out, riding proudly to the trumpets sounding the march, whilst the people cheered as they passed. By

degrees the sound of the trumpets died away in the distance; the battle songs grew fainter and fainter, till in the streets of Soissons reigned a silence all the more profound by its extreme contrast to the clamour which had preceded it.

It was a fortnight after the departure of this expedition against the Alemanni, that two young girls were walking in the garden of the Convent of our Lady at Soissons, whilst beneath the trees flitted and passed the black dresses and white veils of the novices of this sacred House of Refuge. These two kept apart from the rest of the community, as if engaged in a conversation which engrossed them too much to allow them to observe that they had separated themselves from their companions. Both being dressed alike in the habit of the neophytes, or novices, they might have been supposed to be sisters, if it had not been for the marked characteristics of the taller one, in direct contradistinction to the fair girl, who leant, almost nestled, on her arm. Both were now silent, as if the last topic of conversation finished; they paused before they began another. At length, the fairer girl, raising herself from her drooping attitude, said to her companion—

‘We have not had such a lovely evening as this for a long time, have we, Iërne? It is such a treat after all those cold, dark days. I hope it will last; it makes everything look so bright and hopeful. How the sun has conquered those dark clouds, bursting triumphantly through them, and shining out in such splendour. It must have been thus our Blessed Lord—be His holy Name for ever extolled and magnified!—burst the gates of the dark tomb, which could hold Him captive no longer than He so willed it, and shone again triumphantly on the earth, rejoicing in His return from the unknown depths.’

‘Thou forgettest, sweet Agatha,’ returned her companion, ‘in the application of thy simile, that the sun is going down into the grave of night, and is not in the act of arising from it, to ascend higher and higher in the heavens till he attains the effulgence of midday glory. So much, thou seest, for the lore thou callest heathen. I learnt that much from my teachers, to whom the sun is a symbol of the light of divine truth, as night



is that of the darkness of evil ignorance. Surely thy teachers know better than to have taught thee what thou sayest?’

‘O Iërne! It is not my teachers who are in fault, it is my stupid self. Sorry am I to have spoken so heedlessly. It was all my evil self-sufficiency. I was so pleased with my idea, thought it so appropriate, and now it has made thee deem my teachers not so well able as thine to instruct me in divine truths. I am not worthy to learn; and the effect of my folly is to shake thy confidence in those who are labouring with prayerful teaching to bring thee to the light of Christ the Lord,—be His Name for ever extolled and magnified! I shall go indoors as a penance, at once, I who had so thought to enjoy this lovely evening with thee. I will seek the holy Father Ambrosius when he comes to-morrow, and confess to him my grievous sin, and seek from him a penitential exercise most fitted to root out of my heart this deadly sin of pride and self-conceit.’

‘Oh, no, do not go in yet, Agatha. It is I who ought not to have said what I did. More to blame am I than thou art. I did not mean it for reproof; I was hardly thinking of my own words when I spoke. My thoughts were far, far away. Thou knowest how dearly I love the venerable Mother Agnes, I who never knew a mother’s love and care. How good she is to me, how kind, how indulgent to my obstinate resistance to her efforts to lead me to what she deems the highest truths! Believe me, Agatha, nothing said by any one can lessen my belief, that all she does, says, or thinks, concerning me and for me is kindly meant. Would for her sake, for the reward she seeks, even the bending of my unyielding spirit to receive the light which shines on her soul, I could break down the barriers of my training, and learn to doubt the teachers to whom I have hitherto listened in mute reverence.’

‘If thou canst think thus of her, dear Iërne, and so highly of her motives, why canst thou not go yet a little farther, and believe what she strives to teach thee?’

‘I cannot tell thee, Agatha. Nor do I know myself. It may be the inherent tenacity of my race, which refuses to accept the convictions of others unless convinced of their truth.

Or it may be that, amongst my own people, I have been instructed in a religion so beautiful, yet so stern, have been so deeply impressed by the profound, yet terrible truths it inculcates—that my mind is not so easily moved to receive a new teaching, which, in some things, and it is that which distracts me, is not so very far different to that in which I have been trained from my earliest years.'

'O Iërne, my own precious Iërne, do not blaspheme. I must not listen to thee now!' And the young girl stopped her ears with both hands.

'Oh, pardon me, Agatha. It is I who am to blame now,' she said, gently removing the hands of Agatha from her ears. 'Hear me crave for pardon. I ought not to have said what must have given such a shock to thy pure religious mind. O stern and holy teachers, it is I who have disgraced your high teaching now! I have soiled the virgin page of thy pure soul, Agatha, breathing in thine ears words which might raise in thy mind clouds of darkness and doubt, obscuring the glory of the light of truth. Come, do not let us spoil the enjoyment of this lovely evening with discussions more fitted for the dark paths leading through the sacred forest of the dread oak trees of Armorica, than for these regions of a sweet peaceful life. Let us leave off such fruitless talk. Where are those lovely violets thou didst promise to show me?'

'They are under the east wall, where the sun shines at full at noonday. They lie there, securely sheltered from the bitter wind, as we do in this holy refuge, in the loving arms of our dearest Mother, our Blessed Lady, who is to us a high wall of defence against the breath of the Evil One. There they lie, basking in the sun, as we do in the lifegiving rays of the Divine Sun of Righteousness. I suppose this warmer day has brought them out. I almost wonder the cold we have had has not completely checked their flowering. I fear we shall have more cold too next month, March is often so bitter.'

'Yes, March must indeed be clad in iron armour, in these exposed plains. He rules in a more peaceful garb in Armorica, where the white crested waves of the mild Atlantic bring warmth

to our western shores, and temper the bitterness of the east winds. Let us go and look for these lovely children of the early spring, symbols of modest sweetness. The paths of this garden are less dangerous to tread than the ground on which we had so foolishly ventured a short while past. It does not become either of us, who are yet novices in our respective schools, to intrude with rash untrained steps into the sacred arcana, and try to peer behind the awful veil before our time. Oh, here are these lovely creatures! With what a brilliant purple they must glow in the noonday sun, drawing forth their sweetness with his powerful rays, as the rays of divine truth draw forth the virtues which are the sweet perfume of the soul, dead but for that lifegiving influence. And those lovely white ones, large and pure, symbols of the purity of the newly baptized, when the green robe of regeneration, green like the new leaves of the new birth of the young spring, is flung over their shoulders, and the golden egg, symbol of eternal renovation of life, is given into their bosom, as a token of their new birth from a dark life of ignorance and sin to a new life of knowledge and righteousness, as it is also a symbol of the new birth to life and light, after the dark night of winter.'

'Art thou baptized in thy religion, Iërne?' asked Agatha, amazed with what she heard her friend say.

'Yes; first with water, when our teaching has enabled us to understand the extent of our ignorance and the all-pervading wisdom of the Eternal Spirit of Truth; and then with fire, when years of long continued teaching have breathed into our nostrils the breath of life, the spirit of Eternal Wisdom itself. But let us speak no more of these things. We will sit in this sheltered spot, and enjoy their beauty. Nay, pluck them not, Agatha, dear! For them there is no blessed certainty after death of a reunion of spirit with the Eternal Spirit, as there is for us; a blessing which we cannot enjoy in this life, where our souls are bound with the chains of our nature, its desires, its feelings, an immortal life, which we cannot enjoy even after death, unless our mortal lives have been such as to lead us to the love of all good, of all beauty, of all wisdom, so

as to render reunion with them, hereafter, a source of perfect happiness to us. Such is the teaching of our holy runes.'

The two girls sat down on a seat where they were sheltered from the breeze, which, hushed almost to a zephyr, was yet fresh, if not cold. In this position they were not far from a postern gate, opening on a street not much frequented, and from which one might have looked far over the country, had not a high and massive wall intervened, bordering from west to east the other side of the street. The postern gate, closely locked and barred from outward intrusion, gave evidence, by the rusty state of these securities, of a long disuse. The house had been for many years uninhabited when its owner, a noble Gaul, presented it to the venerable Archbishop Remigius, when he was seeking for a fit dwelling wherein he could establish the community dedicated to the ever Blessed Virgin. This house was intended, not only as a sanctuary of refuge from the world behind the black veil of perpetual virginity, but also as a place where young and noble virgins might be trained in the divine truths of the Catholic faith. They could remain in that refuge, if they so preferred it, as professed Sisters of the three vows, or return to the world, virtuous daughters, wives, and mothers, who, the holy Remigius impressed upon the Sister Agnes, Mother of the Novices, would more effectually Christianize, and so humanize, a world torn to pieces by the uncurbed passions of untrained men and women, than any other instruments employed for that purpose. Agatha, placed here by her parents, noble Gauls, living on the frontier of Armorica, in what had once been a part of that country, was the only person, except the spiritual Mother of the community, who could speak the native language of Iërne, and was chosen for that reason to be the friend and companion of the Armorican captive, placed here in sanctuary by the King.

Agatha sat with her hand in that of the friend she loved so dearly, her head resting on her shoulder, watching the dark eyes of her companion, now dreamily fixed on the fast declining sun, his latest rays tinging the trees forming a closer covert farther down the garden, making their branches,

thickening with the swelling buds, glow with a crimson light, already deepening into the purple of late evening.

‘Why art thou so sad this evening, Iërne?’ asked Agatha, after a pause. ‘What makes thee so? Nothing I have said, I hope?’

‘No; think not that, dearest. I am sad, though I cannot tell the cause, nor what leads my thoughts to dwell on the far off woods of my home. It is not that I long to return to them,’ she said, with a shudder. ‘Oh, no! I fear, I tremble, when I think of all the dread horrors which the depths of the consecrated forest veil from the eyes of the uninitiated. Gwench’lan is stern; stern and exacting of perfection as the tenets he holds. No! never to return, I hope. Were I there, I should have to bind round my head the wreath of a priestess, the wreath of consecrated oak, symbol of the eternal strength and endurance, twined with the sacred mistletoe, that pure shining symbol of the moon in her fulness, shining with a light reflected from the glorious sun, as does the mind, in the plenitude of a true teaching, shine with the reflected glory of the Divine Truth. I should have to serve altars which demand human blood as an atonement for sin, human life as a sacrifice of satisfaction. Oh, no! never to return there! Here there is a peace, a holy security, a repose no words of mine can tell how deeply I enjoy. In these walls there is symyathy from loving looks straight from the loving heart, kind forbearance with those who cannot attain, and what mortal can, to perfection, the compassion of a mother with her erring child, the tenderness of a wise Physician, curing the sick instead of killing them, the loving faithfulness of a Good Shepherd seeking out His sheep and bringing them into the fold, instead of closing the door fast against those who stray. O Agatha, thou canst never know what unspeakable happiness, what a token of the divine favour it is to be born in the bosom of a Church unshaken by the waves of ignorant doubt breaking over her. See this lovely picture our venerable Mother gave me. The *Fæderis Arca* she calls it. See her thou callest the ever Blessed Virgin standing on a half moon, floating on a

stormy sea. The true Ark of the Covenant, floating on the stormy waves of ignorance, of sin, of false teachings, that true and universal deluge, bringing ruin, annihilation, to all save her steadfast self, and those safe in her sheltering bosom. What an unspeakable blessing to be born within that sheltering bosom, instead of being born and trained without her walls, as I have been, only to be admitted within her holy refuge through the sharp conflict of soul-torturing doubts and fears, conflicts engendered by an education not my inheritance I believe !'

'What meanest thou, Iërne?' asked Agatha, rising in her surprise from her position. 'Why sayest thou not mine inheritance? Thy parents—were they Catholics?'

'I cannot tell; yet have good reasons to suspect it. Gwench'lan hides from me all he possibly can of my earliest life. Whispers have come to my hearing that I fell into his hands as an infant, my mother dying at my birth; my mother a Christian and a fugitive from the shores of the greater Britain, flying from the devastation following the steps of the Saxon invader of that sacred island. Hundreds of these even now come over, seeking safety on the Armorican shores, the shores of this lesser Britain. Gwench'lan tells me that I am the descendant of priests and kings, once rulers in this land, and that I am to be a priestess devoted to serve the altars of a religion as ancient as the world, of a religion extending once in its spiritual sway from the plains of Mesopotamia and Chaldea even to the limits of the ultimate Thule. Nor may I do aught, he says, to disgrace my lineage. And he has educated me with the greatest care to understand truths which, he says, are higher than the universe, deeper than the profoundest abyss, and exact from those who learn them the highest perfection and purity. Oh, who will save me from a teacher so stern, so dreadful, so relentless? Who will save me from the heavy bonds of his law, which even here enchains my will and fetters my spirit?'

'Our Blessed Lady will save thee, Iërne. Oh, fly to her protection! Prostrate thyself at her feet, and entreat her to

intercede for thee with her Divine Son and Lord—be His Name for ever extolled and glorified!—that thou mayest never again fall into the hands of this dreadful man!’

‘Would I had thy childish, teachable, trusting heart, my Agatha,’ said Iërne, stooping, as she spoke, to kiss her young brow, beneath which her earnest eyes flashed with enthusiasm. ‘Mine is, I fear, so proud and hard, that it will not bend, and if I am again delivered up to that will I cannot resist, it will be the just punishment that my pride entails upon me. Were I to go with thee to the chapel, where thou so earnestly desirest to lead me, my prayers would be cold and heartless, for conviction is not yet come to me of the efficacy of such prayer; and whilst thou wouldst be pouring out fervent supplications with a believing heart, I should either be a hypocrite if I imitated thy outward actions, or should sit mutely wondering why I could not pray like thee for a protection thou seemest to expect so confidently for the mere asking.’

‘Sorry am I thou wilt not let me persuade thee to try, Iërne!’ said Agatha, with a sigh, again laying her head on her friend’s shoulder, as if wearied with the vain striving with her. After a pause, she asked her—

‘If thou darest thine uncle so much, Iërne, why didst thou so earnestly entreat the King not to allow the King of Ripuaria to ransom thee? He would have paid thy ransom to the King, and then thou wouldst always have remained with us.’

‘Sweet spirit of innocence,’ replied Iërne, stroking the soft fair hands of her companion, and drawing the white veil of a novice she wore close round her pure forehead, ‘well for thee! this happy ignorance of the world and its wicked ways. Better for me, Agatha, the depths of the oak forests of Armorica with their awful altars, than to dwell in the courts of a barbarian who owns no God but his own lawless desires. Yea, death is dearer far than either! Death, which would liberate my spirit, and carry me to a shelter far beyond the reach of finite man, even into the bosom of the Eternal Infinite!’

‘Oh, do not say so, Iërne! wish not for death before the sacramental water of baptism has been poured over thy soul!’

Shouldst thou die before thou becamest a Catholic, I should never see thee in those happy courts above where I hope one day to meet thee. But hark!' she exclaimed in terror; 'what is that, Iërne? didst thou not hear something? Oh, listen, Iërne, listen! it is a low strange sound, as of the creaking of a hinge. What can it be?' And the young girl clung to her companion, looking up into the face of Iërne, who, circling her with her arms, bent on her fast paling cheek the dark lustre of her eyes, beaming with protecting love.

'Little trembler, art thou so easily frightened? A bird flying across thy path, a leaf larger than usual falling from the tree. Thou art exciting thyself with all this serious talk, and getting nervous. Thou must go in! it is even now late for thee. I will go with thee to the door of the porch. Thou wilt not mind going in alone. I shall not be long after thee.'

'Come in too, Iërne; I do not like the thought of thy remaining here alone! See, the rest are all gone in. Do come—come in with me now!' pleaded the young girl.

'I shall not stay out long. I had leave to remain out till the bell rung. Thou knowest I am braver than thou art, timid one, and I should like to meditate on that passage our venerable Mother has marked for me in her beautiful book. See, the page opens here where I put the slip of parchment thou gavest me as a token. How well the pure blue of that flower looks on the gold ground. Was it not our dearest Mother who illuminated this scroll?'

'Yes; but it was I who wrote thy name there. Dost thou not think I am getting to be a wonderful scribe? Our venerable Mother says I may soon try my hand on the copies of the New Testament we have to transcribe for our holy and venerable Archbishop. I shall like that much better than embroidering the silk bands for the robes those ladies sent last week, only that it will be money for the community. As for that, we shall have money for the Testaments also, and it is all to be put in a fund for a class of poor girls to be taught to read and work. But see, we are at the porch door. Mind thou stayest not out too long, loiterer.'



‘No, not long. I merely thought that in the stillness of the evening, under the unbounded vault of heaven, I might, perchance, meditate to greater profit than between the narrow walls of my cell. It may be a prejudice of my education that I fancy some ray of the divine light may fall out there more freely on the page, making its sense clear to my comprehension.’

‘O Iërne, if thou couldst but feel it, that no dark walls of a cell, however narrow, can keep out the light of Christ,—be His Name for ever extolled and magnified! It shines in the deepest cave, illumines the depths of the valley of the shadow of death, pierces the profoundest grave, and redeems the soul from the nethermost depths of hell. He is ever near to save and deliver us, alike from the darkness of ignorance and doubt, from the snares of the Evil One, or the hands of wicked men.’

‘I know it, Agatha. I feel it; none more deeply. That lore has long been taught to me, only that I express it in different words to thine. Now, good-bye, or night will overtake us both.’ Saying this, Iërne stooped to kiss the pure brow of her young companion, who, answering her friend’s kiss with a loving smile, drew her veil closer round her and entered the house.

Iërne returned slowly down the garden, by the path which had led her and Agatha to the house. Thoughts were crowding through her brain as she went on, her eyes on the ground. She seemed to be wrestling in mortal conflict with herself, utterly forgetting the book in her hand, as if the musings of her spirit had absorbed her outward senses. Presently her thoughts returned into the channel in which they had run whilst Agatha was still with her. She shuddered, as she thought of the proposal of the King of Ripuaria to buy her of her captor. For that was the real nature of the transaction, which the unconscious Agatha had looked upon as the generous action of paying her ransom, so that she might not be obliged to return to her own country, but remain always in the convent she seemed to love so dearly. The Armorican girl had seen enough of Siegbert of Cologne, King of Ripuaria, had endured enough of his distasteful notice, during the days that elapsed before the

men who had taken her prisoner returned to Soissons, for her not to loathe utterly a proposal to which she had listened with horror. Rather than fall into his hands, she would hail with gratitude the messengers with the ransom which would restore her to her people and her country. What if she returned to Armorica? Would all this peaceful convent life fade away like a lovely dream, never to be renewed? Would she not long for it with vain yearning, in the dark woods of Armorica? And the messengers would come. She knew her uncle too well to think he would allow her to remain quietly where she was. Yes, they would come. Would they bring a ransom with them? She doubted that. It would be more likely a message of defiance, a threat of vengeance. Living or dead, she knew he would take her from the Frank wolf. How, and when?

Suddenly she raised her eyes, as if conscious some change had broken the solitude which had hitherto reigned around her. Her questions were answered. She was near the postern gate, and there, right in her path, stood the tall figure of a man, of determined and commanding aspect. One glance at his face, and she stood bound as by a spell. She clasped her hands in the overwhelming dismay his presence caused her, and the despair his purpose, which she knew too well, inspired, her lips having scarcely the power to mutter faintly the word 'Gwench'lan.'

'Not a word,' he said sternly, as he read her affright and the despair expressed in her supplicating action. 'Not a sob. Prepare to come with me. Supplicating looks! Clasped hands to me! Well do I understand thy reluctance to leave these soft enervating teachers, for the stern and lofty teaching of our mighty lore. Should I be here if it were not to wrest thee from their snares, if I did not mean thou shouldst return with me?' Saying these words, he put a cloak round her, drawing its hood over her head, and lifting her up from the ground, he carried her through the postern gate, now standing open from the side hitherto secured by its hinges.

It was the affair of a second. Outside this door, he paused to draw it back to its place. It yielded to his hand, but when

it reached its former position it swayed to one side, falling inwards, and half suspended. At this moment a loud rumbling noise was heard, as a large mass of masonry fell from the wall of Cæsar into the road, revealing, just as Gwench'lan appeared from the garden, the cave towards which he prepared to hurry the unfortunate Iërne.

'It cannot be helped,' he said to Alan Fergan, standing outside the gate, 'it must remain as it is. Quick; we have no time to lose! What bell is that,' he sharply inquired, as the bell for assembling the community was rung in the convent. Poor, lost Iërne! She could have answered him. It was a call she was powerless to answer, a call to peace, love, repose, safety, all, all from which she was now being hurried away. A voice calling to her in vain, fading, fading on her ear, fainter and fainter, as the relentless Gwench'lan carried her into the cave, and hurried with her down the subterranean passage, farther and farther on the road to despair and darkness.

Arriving at a spot where two men were waiting, he put Iërne on her feet and hurried on again. Down, down the dark passage, the inflexible man dragged the reluctant girl, whose despairing anguish was deep, too deep for tears. Oh, was she not lost, lost for ever? No, not lost. As if the voice of Agatha whispered in her ear, came the words of the Psalm she had so often heard chanted in the chapel of the convent—*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine: Domine exaudi vocem meam!*

Iërne felt the Divine Presence hovering over her, and, to her spiritual vision gleamed, not the lurid fire from the stone altars of the stern worship of the Druids, but the heavenly light radiating from the Sacred Heart of the Crucified One.

Soon, Iërne thought, they seemed to turn some corner. Gwench'lan struck his hand accidentally on the side of the passage, seemingly cut in the rock. Muttering a word of vexation, he said—

'We must stop one moment and look for it. It is my armilla. I suppose that blow broke it. It is fallen on the ground. We must leave no traces of our flight save our steps; these we have no time to efface. Hast thou found it?' he asked

impatiently, as one of them, groping about in the darkness, uttered a sound.

‘Yes, it is here,’ he said, as he touched the metal surface of the armilla, still warm from the contact with its wearer’s arm.

‘Keep it for the present. I may not lose it, engraved as it is with holy runes. On, on!’

With the swiftness of inspiration, Iërne dropped the book she had held tightly clutched in her hand, with a precaution which caused it to entangle itself in the folds of the cloak Gwench’lan had wrapped round her, and from which it fell noiselessly to the ground. She had meant to carry it with her, as a protecting talisman in the life now impending over her, as a solace in the drear regions towards which she was now being hurried, as a remembrance of that dear home so full of peace and love, which she was to know no more. But she bravely sacrificed her feelings to her necessity. Would it not be as a signpost on the way she had fled, a guide to those who followed her, pointing out the way she had passed? For she knew she would be followed, pursued, perhaps, overtaken by the fiery Franks, eager to take her from her ravishers. But would they come that way? They could not fail. The postern gate hanging by its lock, the ruined wall, the yawning cave, all would point to that passage. Haste could alone secure the escape of her uncle’s party. If they were overtaken, might they not be bound, perhaps even slain, in the conflict of the meeting.

‘Not many minutes after the incident of the book, Iërne felt the atmosphere freshening, as if they were coming to the open air once more. Soon they emerged from the passage into a wide cavern, darkened by the now fast advancing night. Gwench’lan stopped for a moment to wrap Iërne up in her cloak, securing her hands and feet in its folds, so that she could not use either. Then taking her again in his arms, he bore her swiftly down a steep path, followed by the rest. The hood of the mantle her uncle had pulled over her head had fallen back, and she caught a glimpse, in the twilight fast deepening into night, of a sheet of water, perhaps, a lake, in which was reflected the bright crescent of a young moon. It

was a lonely, deserted glen, thick with trees and brushwood, and overhung with beetling cliffs. They reached a spot at a short distance, where some men were standing holding horses. On one of these Gwench'lan mounted, and taking Iërne from Alan Fergan, to whom he gave her to hold for him, he prepared to set off.

'Where is Morven?' he asked, as he paused for that purpose. 'Did I not see him mount his horse at the mouth of the cavern, regardless of my orders?'

'He is trying to coax his brute down,' answered one of those who had waited for him in the passage, now mounted like himself. It seems frightened, and was going up the cliff when I passed. A fall would be a meet penalty for his disobedience.'

'We cannot wait for him now,' answered the chief. 'Let the rest mount at once, and follow me.' With these words he galloped off along the road which led out of the valley.

A strange terror filled the mind of Iërne. She knew, from the strong concussion produced by the action of the horse on which she was carried, that they must be galloping along a road, hard and firm, and yet there was not the sound of a footfall, save a dull muffled thud. This circumstance had something weird and dreadful to her, adding to the horror of the fate which had overtaken her.

The flying party might have gone a mile or so on their way, when, in this strange silence, the click was heard of some metallic object falling on the road and rolling away off the side.

'What noise is that?' sharply asked Gwench'lan, without slackening speed.

'That cursed armilla,' replied his companion. 'We cannot stop to look for it now. I expect it has rolled into the long grass of the ditch. If it is found, the wolf Chlovis may keep it, as all the ransom he is likely to get for our Armorican Princess.'

'We may not pause now. On, on!' said Gwench'lan, and the flying horsemen sped on their way through the dark night, nor drew rein till far beyond the guard of the King of Soissons.

## CHAPTER III.

### *In the Convent.*

WHEN the Armorican captive did not answer the bell which summoned the community to evening prayer, the consternation of all the nuns knew no bounds. Deep silence reigned, notwithstanding, in the waiting assembly, and anxious looks were kept meekly bent on the ground, whilst the search in the house continued, and short questions and shorter answers passed between the venerable Abbess and those she despatched on her errands. When she was fully convinced that the missing lamb of the fold was not to be found in the house, the holy Anastasia dismissed the community to the chapel, enjoining all to unite in earnest supplication for help and guidance in this their sore need, and protection for the absent one in whatever need, spiritual or temporal, she was involved.

The door was no sooner closed on the last retiring figure, than the Abbess struck a small alarum bell on the near table. This summons was promptly answered by a lay sister, whom the Abbess despatched to inquire of the portress whether Marcus, the freedman, was at his post, and to summons him at once to her presence. An instant search in the garden was plainly the only action left to the Abbess. As it was by this time late and getting dark, she thought it more expedient to take her freedman with her, a faithful servant who had known her when she was yet a child in the house of her father, a friend of the holy Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre, the town where she was born. When the holy Remigius chose her out of the Convent of our Lady at Paris, governed by the holy Geneviève, to be at the head of the community he was founding at Soissons, she had sent to ask her mother for the

slave Marcus. To him she gave his freedom, and appointed him her steward in all that concerned the secular administration of the community she governed.

‘Thou must come with me, my son,’ she said to him, as, obeying her summons, he stood before her. ‘The Armorican captive is not to be found in the house, nor has she been seen to return from the garden. It is meet we seek her there.’

‘We shall require a torch, venerable Mother. It is nearly dark ; we shall scarcely see.’

‘There will be light enough for our search, my son. She will be easily distinguished by her white veil. A torch in the garden would arouse the curious. I would fain not attract notice until I know somewhat more of this strange adventure.’

‘True, venerable Mother. You forget nothing,’ said the freedman, as they passed through the porch door of the garden.

‘Speak not thus, my son,’ replied the Abbess. ‘Alas, I should have foreseen this misfortune, had I not deemed it impossible that this sanctuary could have been so easily entered. Was I not warned by the King of the character of her wily uncle, of her countrymen, of their determination to repossess themselves of the noble virgin intrusted to my safe keeping? Have I not heard that sanctuaries the most sacred have been violated by rude and lawless men? If she be not in the garden, she has been taken out of it by evil men. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa,*’ she ejaculated, striking her breast, ‘this disaster has been permitted to befall me in chastisement of my vain self-confidence, my shortcomings in the vigilance, foresight, and precaution I had so boastfully thought I had exerted to the utmost. O noble virgin, O innocent lamb,’ she moaned to herself as she continued her search, ‘lost through my laxity in watchfulness, unworthy shepherd that I am ! The wolf has entered the fold, and carried thee off. What hast thou thought of me, O tender virgin ; of the careless shepherd who did not come between thee and the ravisher, when he tore thee from this sacred refuge? *O, miserere mei.* Let not this, my sin, O Lord, be the cause of ruin to Thy poor

lamb. Oh, that precious soul, not yet regenerated by the healing waters of baptism !'

Thus inwardly groaning and accusing herself, she reached the postern gate, closely followed by Marcus. When she saw it in the state Gwench'lan had left it, she stood speechless with amazement and consternation, a thousand dreadful suggestions sweeping over and nigh overwhelming her usually constant mind. This lasted only for a moment, the next she ejaculated with pious fervour, '*Santa Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis !*'

'What horrible violence is this, holy Mother?' exclaimed the freedman, examining the wall as closely as the darkness permitted. 'Holy Mother of God, come to our assistance in this our hour of peril and perplexity !'

'There must be instant search instituted from without, my son. Haste thee to the noble Antrusion.<sup>1</sup> Beg him to come with all speed to investigate this matter. This belongs to his office, no longer to mine. On thy way to him, seek the captain of the nearest guard, and ask him to send two men, determined of will and well armed, to keep the breach till such time as the Antrusion arrives. Myself, meanwhile, will guard this violated entrance of the fold of which God has constituted me guardian.'

'Far be it from you, venerable Mother! Holy Virgin! what know we of violent and wicked men lurking in ambush in the darkness of the night? They may rush out upon you, left thus defenceless, and seize you standing here alone. Rather, I humbly beseech you, return to the safe keeping of four walls and a door well barred and locked. Stand not here, in the very jaws of danger, all the more appalling that we know not in what it may consist. Let me, I pray you, attend you to the porch of the house. I can go out by the front entrance, and seek the aid your excellent prudence suggests, before I seek the noble Antrusion.'

'My son,' she said, 'I know there is peril, imminent peril somewhere, and to some one, if not to all. Therefore will I

<sup>1</sup> "The intrusted." The highest title of nobility amongst the Franks (See Gibbon).



remain at this post to confront this peril, whatever it may be, which threatens the safety of the sheep committed to my charge. Thou hast not forgotten, my son, how it is written, "For He giveth His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." But go, my son, I know thou meanest well. Go, and seek the captain of the guard first; it is best that the protection of armed men should be obtained at once. 'I need not urge thee to thy best speed.'

Before starting on his errand, Marcus essayed to replace the door of the garden, so as to afford some slight protection to the unquailing woman, whose resolution he could not alter. It would not stand upright. The weight of the door, hanging on its locks and bolts, had so wrenched the one and broken out the others, that all his efforts proved fruitless.

'Lose not, my son,' said the holy woman, 'in vain efforts to replace a useless door, the time thou shouldst spend to more profit. Haste, seek the help of man! I, meanwhile, will call on the help of the Lord of Hosts.'

Thus urged, Marcus placed the door leaning on the outside wall, the only manner in which it would now stand, and leaving most reluctantly the outlet to the violated sanctuary completely unguarded, he departed on his errand. During his absence the Abbess stood within the garden, fronting the yawning portal, her hands meekly crossed on her breast, pressing more closely into it the bronze crucifix she wore inside her dress, repeating to herself the words of the Ninetieth Psalm—

*'Quoniam in me speravit, liberabo eum: protegam eum, quoniam cognovit nomen meum. Scuto circumdabit te veritas ejus: non timebis a timore nocturno.'*

Did no one hear the voice of the Almighty issue the command, which sent the mighty Archangel in swift descent to the lonely spot where stood the defenceless woman? Did no one see that valiant Prince of the hosts of the Most High God stand behind her, his terrible sword in his strong right hand, pointing at the breast of the unseen foe, his ample shield, of dazzling glory, covering her august and venerable head with its invulnerable protection?

To none but those who, full of the Holy Ghost, having their eyes steadfastly fixed upon things spiritual, having their ears for ever open, listening to the voice of God, for ever sounding through the universe, is it permitted to hear such high commands, to see a vision so glorious to behold.

Marcus, the freedman, sped down the street towards the station appointed for the east guard of the city. Within a few steps of it he met one of the Frank soldiers belonging to it. Of him he asked if he could see his captain on a question of the utmost import.

'The noble Ethelbert! Yes. Thou wilt find him in the guard room,' answered the man, in a bluff, but not rude manner.

'I pray thee get me speech of him; it is of the greatest need. My message is of a great disaster.'

'An it be as thou sayest, friend, 'twere best I should return with thee, to ensure no delay in thy message.' And the soldier turned back towards the guard room, followed by Marcus. A bright fire of logs blazed on the hearth, some twenty men sitting on benches round a table, playing games of hazard, whilst curved horns beside them testified there was not wanting liquor to assuage the thirst induced by the excitement of the games. The neighbourhood of this guard room to the convent would more than account for the alacrity and stealthiness of Gwench'lan's movements.

'Hermanfrid!' exclaimed one of the men, as Marcus followed his guide into the room, 'back already! Thou must have had the swift wings of the white sea horse lent to thee for the occasion, or thou hast not yet been, perchance. If that is how things stand with thee, the noble Ethelbert will not forget thy lack of obedience to his orders for despatch, in his report of thee to the Antrusion. Thou who knowest, none better, that obedience is one of the noble Ethelbert's hobbies.'

'And silence is another, thou chattering daw,' said Ethelbert himself, coming out of an inner room. 'This is no meeting place of the night witches, that thou shouldst keep up such a clatter. How now, Hermanfrid, not gone yet? That is not the promptitude of a perfect soldier.'

'Noble captain, the freedman of the venerable Mother of the House of Maidens met me. He said he was on matters requiring immediate attention. At this urgent prayer for speedy speech with thee I returned with him, the better to ensure it.'

'I hold thee excused, comrade; but depart now on thine errand, and make up with despatch for the time thou hast lost. Has the patrol from the palace passed?'

'Not yet, my captain. It wants five minutes to the appointed time,' was the ready response of one of the guards at the table, as he looked at the clepsydra standing near him.

'That is well; and now, trusty freedman, what is thine errand?' asked Ethelbert, turning to Marcus, as Hermanfrid left the guard room.

'The door of the garden of the House of our Lady has been broken open, and the venerable Mother prays that, with all speed, two men of determined will, and well armed, be sent to keep the unguarded entrance, till such time as I can find the noble Antrusion, whom she has directed me to summon.'

'How sayest thou? The door of the garden broken open!' repeated Ethelbert in consternation, whilst a thrill shot through him, as the blood throbbing to his heart made the veins on his forehead swell out with its swift return like knotted cords. 'This is, indeed, urgent cause. Two men are scarce sufficient for such a service, when danger to the noble maidens of that sacred refuge may be impending. We must have more. Marcomir, see thou to the charge of the guard whilst I hasten with help. To me, comrades!' he cried, calling by name six of the best men in the room. 'Take your arms and come with me. And thou shalt lead on,' he added, turning to Marcus. 'This admits of no delay.'

The men jumped up from their seats, took down their swords hanging by the wall, clasped their helmets under their chins, and, bracing their shields on their arms, took up their heavy francisques in answer to their captain's summons. Ethelbert, coming from the inner room into which he had hurried for his arms, put himself at their head, Marcus leading, and they set off with a well trained step, accelerated by dread

lest some vital harm had befallen the maidens of that sacred house, considered under the particular charge of the east guard.

'By the red wine cups in the halls of Valhalla!' cried one of the men, as drawing near he caught sight of the door leaning on the wall, and the open entrance. 'What thrice accursed *wolfgehr*<sup>2</sup> has done this outrage? May the furies of all the Valkyriors seize him!'

'Silence!' exclaimed Ethelbert, as he saw the figure of the venerable Abbess standing in the breach of the wall. 'It is the consecrated Mother,' he continued, with a feeling of religious awe, engendered by the traditions of his country. 'Comrades, halt here,' he said, 'we may not look upon her venerable face. Beware the ready francisque of King Chlovis, if we give offence in this neighbourhood. Marcus, go thou, say to the consecrated Mother her obedient servants wait upon her will.'

'It is well, my son,' replied the holy Abbess, as Marcus delivered the message. The aid of the Most High has guarded the breach till the aid of man should arrive. Now, trusty servant, do thou see to the disposal of all things necessary for security to the sheep of this fold this night. I go to seek my trembling flock within. God be with thee, my son.'

With this pious salutation the holy Anastasia returned up the garden, and entered the house. Summoning to her aid the lay sister Perpetua, she locked and barred the porch door, and then the inner one, with her help, a duty generally performed by Marcus, absent on his quest.

'Are they returned from the chapel?' she asked. 'Truth is to say, my sore distress of mind has taken from me all power of measuring time.'

'Yes, venerable Mother, they are returned,' said her assistant.

'Hie thee then to the Sister Agnes. Tell her to send hither with all speed the novice Agatha. I would speak with her.'

The door had scarcely shut on the retiring messenger ere it opened again to give passage to the one sent for. There she stood, her veil drawn close around her, her eyes meekly bent

<sup>2</sup> *Gehr*, from *vagre*, to wander, afterwards *wolf-garon* or *loup-garon*.

on the ground, her hands folded, waiting till the venerable Abbess should address her.

'Come here to me, my own precious lamb,' she said to her, and as the novice obeyed her voice, full of compassionate love, the Abbess put her arm round the girl's waist, and drawing her close to her bosom, kissed her on the forehead, parting her veil for that purpose.

'My sweet child,' she asked, 'what passed in the garden between thee and the noble virgin Iërne? Tell me all, as well as thou canst remember.'

'Yes, venerable Mother, all. She was so very sad; she talked a good deal about her religion, as she often did when alone with me, as I have told you. I cannot exactly remember her words,' said the young girl, putting her hand to her forehead.

'Do not try, my child. What thou canst tell is sufficient for me.'

'We sat down on the seat under the east wall, looking at the violets. It was there she was so sad, and sat gazing at the setting sun. I was so frightened with a strange noise, and she brought me back to the house.' And the poor young girl shuddered, and nestled closer to the protecting bosom to which she was clasped.

'A strange noise. Of what sort, my child? Do not fear, little one. Art thou not under the protection of our Blessed Lady?'

'A low, grating sound, as of the hinges of a gate turning,' she answered, and shuddered again.

'How long did it last?'

'I cannot tell, venerable Mother, for when Iërne saw I was frightened she brought me in at once. Oh, it seemed to me as if the gates of hell were being slowly opened, to let out the stealing, prowling lion, seeking whom he may devour.'

'*That* lion, my child, has only power over those who put themselves wilfully, boastfully, in his way, trusting in their own strength. He has no power to hurt such a sweet, obedient, confiding lamb as thou art. Thou art perfectly safe from him, so long as thou keepest within the fold of Christ, that is, the

paths of virtue and self-denial, which He came to teach us, and the courts of our ever blessed Mother, His beloved Spouse, the Catholic Church. It is only to those who stray in curious longing after new teachers, through pride of strength, or wilful disobedience, from the true fold, that lion is dangerous. Didst thou not chant the Ninetieth Psalm in the service this evening, my child? Yes. Then why tremblest thou, if thou knowest under whose protection thou art? Thou must pray for the courage of true faith, my daughter. No true servant of the Lord is ever afraid "of the arrow that flieth in the day, of the business that walketh about in the dark, of invasion, or of the noonday devil." But tell me more of this. Did the King's captive also hear the noise?'

'I think not, venerable Mother. It was to read the book reverend Mother Agnes gave to her, that she went back to the garden.'

'Could she have heard that sound and returned to it as a signal,' thought the Abbess for an instant. 'Oh, no! shame on me for such thoughts. I, who know the noble virgin so well. Never of her own freewill would she have left this sure refuge, this ark of safety, this divine fold. My child,' she resumed aloud, 'canst thou tell me what she said to thee as she parted from thee at the porch? What thou saidst to her?'

'She only said she would soon come in. She thought she might gain more divine light under the open vault of heaven than in the narrow cell.'

'Such,' said the Abbess, 'is the intellectual pride of man, who will receive no teaching but in the way he chooses to seek it! O Lord, how mysterious are Thy dealings with men! Hadst Thou but granted her the grace to see that Thy divine light is given only to those who are of mind humble enough to seek it in the appointed way, she would have returned to her cell, not to the garden, and this misfortune would not have happened. I will not torment thy soul with longer suspense, my child,' she said, in answer to the wildly supplicating look in the eyes of the young girl sheltered in her arms; 'trust in the goodness of the Lord, Who doeth all things well, and listen!

She is gone! I greatly fear that lion saw her, as she strayed beyond the fold, and, awaiting her in the form of her uncle, has carried her off. If he has been permitted to accomplish this outrage, it was because the virgin Ierne refused the ways of the Lord, and chose her own ways. Thou, my precious lamb, learn from this the constant practice of that meek submission, that holy faith, which has hitherto gained thee the divine protection. How comes it thou wert not also carried off by that same evil foe, but that the divine hand led thee back to His House of Refuge, the ark of His covenant, ere the devouring lion was permitted to cross the sacred threshold!

‘O venerable Mother,’ cried the novice, the tears welling from her eyes, ‘she will be lost, lost, and not baptized,’ and she hid her face in her hands. ‘Has her uncle taken her away! He of whom she was in such terror. She told me of him. She knew it; she felt he was coming! O Holy Mary, Mother of God, have pity on her! Plead for her at the divine feet of Thy ever glorious Son, that she may not perish everlastingly!’ The agony of the young girl’s grief burst through the ordinary restraints of conventual discipline, whilst the venerable Abbess soothed her with tender love.

‘Right, my child, right! Pray to our Blessed Lady that she may intercede with Her Divine Son and Lord, so that He may incline His ear to hear Ierne’s prayer crying out from the depths to Him—*Domine exaudi vocem meam!* Why dost thou look so earnestly into my face, with eyes beaming with devout fervour? Thy tears are stayed, dear lamb of Christ! What is it thy lips would speak to me?’

‘Mother dearest, most venerable Mother,’ cried the young girl, in her ecstasy of faith, ‘those were the very words in my heart when I intreated her to come in with me, when I told her that the Eye of God could pierce into the lowest depths, that Christ was ever near to hear those who cried out to Him, even when in the hands of the Evil One! Do you think she will remember those words, now she is in danger? Oh, she will! She will call upon Him, and He will hear and save!’

‘Undoubtedly, my child ! God put those words on thy lips for guidance to her in the dark hour of peril, which He knew full well was at hand. My child, return fervent thanks with the deepest humility to the Almighty Father, Who has deigned to make of thee a messenger to remind her of His divine aid, ever near to her whom, in His inscrutable wisdom, He meant to afflict. These words are also a token to us that He will redeem her soul from peril, and not suffer it to be lost in the darkness that surrounds her now.’

Agatha sank on her knees at the feet of the venerable Abbess, who stood, her eyes bent down on the pliant form at her feet, clinging to her arm with one hand, and with the other veiling her eyes, in holy awe and mute veneration, as she listened to an assurance of such divine comfort, spoken with the authority of deep conviction of the truth of the words she uttered.

‘Rise, my child ! It is fit we spend the longest part of this night in supplication for divine assistance and compassion for our lost beloved one, thus delivered over into the hands of evil men. Sister Perpetua, sound the bell that summons to chapel on extraordinary occasions,’ she said to the lay sister who answered the call of the alarum which she had struck, even as she spoke to Agatha.

The novice rose to her feet. She felt the conference was over, and drawing her veil across her face she followed the Abbess, as the bell, swinging in mournful accents through the dark night, summoned the community to the common hall. In few words the venerable Abbess exhorted the Sisters to pray for a soul ‘in extreme peril, in the valley of the shadow of death, in the jaws of hell.’ Sweeping on in silent procession they reached the chapel, which soon resounded with the plaintive litanies of lowly supplication, whilst every now and then the voice of the Abbess, now prostrate before the altar, rose in the hushed night in single supplication.



## CHAPTER IV.

### *In the Passage.*

As soon as the Mother Superior had withdrawn, Marcus returned to Ethelbert and his companions, and led them up to the gap in the doorway of the convent garden.

‘By the splendour of Balder, what is this?’ exclaimed Ethelbert in bewilderment.

‘Some sacrilegious hand has broken open the door of this holy refuge, and the noble Armorican Princess, the King’s beautiful captive, has been carried away,’ answered Marcus. ‘Therefore, the venerable Mother prays thee guard this opening till I seek the aid of the noble Antrusion, to whom she has given me charge to carry immediate information of this outrage.’

At these words and but for the dark night, Marcus would have seen the face of Ethelbert grow pale. He staggered as if he had been struck. For an instant the pulsation of his heart stood still, and a pang ran through his breast as if a sharp knife had been plunged into it. He groaned with mental anguish. How keen a stab these words were to him none but himself could tell. With a strong effort of self-control he roused himself from his mental prostration, and issued his orders in a calm, steady voice.

‘Two of you,’ he said, ‘will seek the valiant Antrusion; one at the west guard, the other at the north. Thou, trusty freedman, hie thee to the south guard; if thou findest not there the noble Chararic, return straight to the palace. The message ye three will bear to him from me is this—“Violence has been done to the sacred House of Maidens; and it is meet he should come without delay to direct measures fit to meet the disaster.”’

Whilst the three started forthwith on their errand, Ethelbert went to the door that lay propped against the wall.

‘We must try and replace this door in the entrance,’ he said, ‘as well as we may. It is not fit men should pry into the sacred inclosure.’

‘I should certainly search the garden first, Ethelbert,’ said one of his companions. ‘Some of the villains may be lurking there for aught we know, and whilst we are shutting the door of the garden they would profit by our sagacity, and steal up to the house itself.’

‘I called thee by name first, thrice valiant comrade, for this service. Belie not my opinion of thy discretion by a rashness which may defeat our best endeavours.’

‘Well, but noble Ethelbert——’

‘Well, but valiant Athanaric! when didst thou ever succeed in thy purposes by doing what is unwise to compass them.’

‘I see naught that is unwise in my suggestion, rather do I esteem it prudent!’

‘So do I,’ and ‘so do I,’ cried two of the others; ‘let us search the garden!’

‘Then by the power of the awful Hertha herself!’ exclaimed Ethelbert, putting himself before the gap, as the three men attempted to pass him; ‘whoever attempts to pass over this threshold before the arrival of the Antrusion, shall feel the force of my francisque, be there four to one!’

‘Not four to one, captain, for I will bide by thee,’ said the Frank who had hitherto remained silent in the clamour. ‘I did not quite see the right of it at first, but I do now.’

‘And that do not I,’ said Athanaric, rather doggedly.

‘Use thy brains, then, to puzzle it out, valiant comrade,’ said Ethelbert; ‘I know thou dost not lack for them, only thou givest so freely the reins to thy first impulses, that they run away with thee like mad bulls. Keep them in with a tight hand till thou hast well considered the question. Thou mightest then see what I mean.’

‘And in the meantime——’

‘Comrade, thou knowest the best thing for a soldier is to do his duty! Now if I am to be captain of the east guard; do as I tell thee! If thou thinkest thou hast more right to be captain, only say so, and I will resign my trust into the hands of the noble Chararic. I know I am all unworthy of the office. Meanwhile, he is my captain, and till he gives me his orders, I can do nothing but guard this entrance according to the behests of the consecrated Mother. What! is the noble Chararic to find nothing but rebellion and self-will when he needs trained and faithful soldiers to aid him in danger and perplexity. If thou dost not like to act upon my orders, return to the guard room and resume thy dice. I would rather, if it so please thee, comrade, thou didst remain and render me thine assistance, if thou couldst so view the matter. Trust me, we should always find it best at all times to “do what we ought, come what may.”’<sup>1</sup>

Athanaric smiled, he generally found his friend right, the result of the self-control he exercised, giving thereby play to a sound judgment. He now hastened to lend a helping hand in replacing the door, which, in spite of all their efforts, would not stand upright. Once it nearly fell into the garden, it was so heavy, carrying both Athanaric and his friend with it, but for their prompt exertions to keep it up.

‘Bring hither some heavy stones,’ said Ethelbert, to the Franks looking on. ‘We might put them inside the threshold, and so stand the door against them.’ And two of the soldiers proceeded to the wall of Cæsar, where they looked in vain for a loose stone or two. The masonry was too solid, too perfect to admit of the probability of any being found there.

‘Seek we lower down,’ exclaimed one of them, as he caught sight of one or two large stones in the middle of the road. ‘But hold! what is this?’ he exclaimed, in surprise, as they came upon what appeared to be a mass of solid masonry. ‘Bend me thy looks on this, comrade. An this be not a cave, or something like it, my sight deceives me! And seest thou not this mass of stones. Naught of this was here yesterday!’

<sup>1</sup> ‘Fais ce que dois adviene que pourra.’

'By the hammer of Thor!' exclaimed his companion, 'if this be not the very way those accursed wolfgehrs must have come and gone! unless, indeed, it be the mouth of the dwelling of Loki. 'Twere well we made this known to our sagacious captain there, the young man with the white hair on his head. 'Tis a beautiful nut for him to crack! But whither goest thou?'

'Saidst thou not, tell our captain of this new find!' answered his companion, who was preparing to run back to the postern gate.

'So did I, but I told thee not to go without a stone. Thou hadst better present thyself before him without one, that is all! and he so patiently bearing up the door till we come. How Athanaric's arms must ache! There, take thou that stone, that's a rare fellow for this work; and I will take this one, if I can; it will stand edge-wise in a most elegant style, a famous prop. Ugh, ugh! what a feather to carry! That's right, comrade, come on! Wont our captain be astonished to see how wise we have become all at once, thanks to his goodly counsels. Faith of a companion! one's brains require a little discretion to guide them in such a turmoil of events as we have here!'

So chattering, laughing, wondering, back they went, bending under the weight of two large stones, their heads full of this strange intelligence, to which they gave vent when they joined their comrades, in a torrent of words and exclamations, stumbling over their words in their haste to tell their news, till they were almost incoherent.

'Nonsense,' said Athanaric; 'a cave in that solid wall of Cæsar!'

'By the rim of my shield, noble captain, it is nothing but the truth! Where could we have found such stones as these, were it not from the wall, crumbled or thrown down, and disclosing what seemed to me the entrance to a cave, or whatever it may be?'

'Went ye in?' asked Ethelbert.

'Mock us not, noble captain. Scant guerdon thou givest us for our beautiful stones! I wot thou judgest us too brainless

to profit by the very wise and learned discourse thou didst deliver for our benefit some ten minutes ago. Now, by the edge of my sword, I hold thee unkind !'

'I meant not to insult thee, comrade, as thou wilt see. Hie ye both back to this cave or entrance. Go not in, on your lives ! Mind that injunction well. Guard it faithfully, francisque in hand, shield on arm, swords loose in the sheath. Stand, one on each side ; eye watching, ear listening, mind awake, heart alert ! Stir not till the noble Chararic comes, except for battle with whatever foe presents itself. As soon as I have put this door somewhat in place, I will be with you.'

'What meaneth this new gear?' asked Athanaric, as he held the door up whilst Ethelbert placed the stones inside the garden threshold.

'Hardly dare I to think, comrade,' said Ethelbert, as with Athanaric's help he steadied the door against the stones. 'This is a most daring outrage, boldly designed, skilfully planned, cunningly executed. Could it be a secret passage? Didst know of any such before?'

'Not I, that is certain,' answered Athanaric ; 'I shall soon begin to believe in the devil these same Christians talk so much about fighting. Methinks no one else could have planned such a scheme as this. Right clever though he be, fain would I get him within reach of my francisque, I would soon make a devil of him ! What, come here and carry the King's captive away from under our very noses ! By the shoulder of my horse, but I'll owe him one for that !'

'There be no devil or evil spirit, be it Loki or whatever other name he bear, so clever to plan, so skilful to execute, as the heart of an evil man,' replied Ethelbert ; 'so much have I learnt in my short experience of things as they go. There, I think that is pretty firm. Canst thou shove the top bolt into the staple ; it only fell out when the lock broke. Nay ! put not thy hand so, but through the crevice, and lay hold of the knob ; through the crack the wrench made. That is it ! Is it shot quite home? Yes ! That is good ! Now, stand ye on either side of this door, ready to oppose any entrance from

without. Should any cry come from within, throw down the door and rush in to the rescue, but not till then.'

'Ja wohl!' answered the two free companions, as each took his assigned post. Ethelbert smiled. "'Union and discipline conquer the world." Eh, comrades? But union first.'<sup>2</sup>

Ethelbert, who, young as he was, knew how to obtain a willing obedience from his comrades, being in time of peace as forbearing to them as he was brave and stout in battle, now left the postern gate in the charge of his sentries, and went down the street, where the other two kept guard at the breach in the wall of Cæsar.

'Right trusty comrades,' he said to them as he came up, and could just distinguish their dark forms on each side of the still darker cave, 'is all quiet within?'

'Yes, captain; not a sound. Seemeth it rather the entrance to the silent depths of the pale Hela<sup>3</sup> than aught else I can think of.'

'It is passing strange we should not have seen this opening before. It is meet we have torches, to explore this opening when the noble Antrusion shall arrive. Mayhap, we have alighted on the entrance to some underground passage. Whatever it may be, keep up your watch. Whoever strives to force the passage from without, knock him down; he may be a friend, and only rash. Whoever strives to force the passage from within, kill him at once, a foe is he!'

'Ja wohl, captain,' was the ready assent.

'I will walk up and down between these two posts till the noble Antrusion arrives. Call to me loudly should aught betide. I have a shrewd suspicion that, whatever happened to-night, it came from the quarter you guard.'

The necessity for concentration of thought, to decide measures equal to such unusual circumstances, had so absorbed the mind of Ethelbert, that it was not till that necessity was over that he had time to think how deeply he was personally affected in the catastrophe of the evening. It was now, and only now, that those words of Marcus which had dealt him so

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*.

<sup>3</sup> Death. Mallet, *North. Antiq.*

rude a blow when first uttered, came back to him in all their import. He put his hand to his forehead, where the blood was beating with loud throbs. Dreadful to him were these words; words of distraction, despair, and death! He had seen the noble Iërne more than once, before the return of the Armorican expedition to Soissons. Appointed to form one of the escort, commanded by King Siegbert, for the safe keeping of the King's captive, he had many opportunities of seeing the noble maiden, and each time he had silently vowed to her the mute worship of his heart. Young—he was but twenty—full of life, full of energy, he had yet been so awed, so subdued by her noble mien, her beauty, her sadness, her womanly purity, that he had looked upon her as a beautiful vision of something far beyond his reach, but which he might worship with a mute reverence at a humble distance. It could not hurt her, tarnish her spotless lustre, that he should fix his eyes upon her, as on a consecrated banner, waving high above the tumult of battle, waving him on to honour, to faith, to deeds of valour, even to death. Happy in that, if he might yet fix his eyes on her, as they closed for the last time in life!

When he had been appointed to the command of the east guard in the absence of the King, his heart beat with a double joy; a noble pride in so distinguished a mark of the confidence the Antrusion placed in his fidelity. There was also a deeper emotion, whose source was a secret, sacred to himself, and jealously guarded from all outward observation, lest the eye of profane men should sully his lovely vision with their coarse looks—the joy of being near the walls which sheltered the beautiful Iërne, of being appointed her chief protector from without. This was, to him, happiness of the highest kind. To devise all his plans for her safety, to fulfil all his duties on her behalf, to think of her, of the deep unfathomable look of her dark violet eyes, shadowed with the fringe of those long dark eyelashes, that gave them a more than superhuman beauty, to think of that royal mantle of dark hair, rippling and shining with such a gleam as the sun fell upon it, making it glow with a purple tinge; to see ever in his mental vision that pure,

calm, broad forehead, that mien of queen-like purity! Oh, she was indeed to him a divinity to worship with pure hands, with noble heart, with deep humility, springing from a self-consciousness that made him feel himself utterly unworthy of her, utterly lowly in her sight.

Silent as he had been before the expedition in which the Armorican Princess had been captured, he had become still more silent on his return to Soissons, unheeding of the coarse carouse, the gibes, the taunts, the merry jests of his comrades at his expense, as he sat thinking of his peerless lady. He did not know her name, that beautiful name Iërne, 'consecrated to God.' If he had but known it, it would have been ever on his lips, in his heart, but still farther off from his hopes than ever, for he would have known then that she was sacred, set apart, but not for man, from her birth.

And she was gone, dragged away he knew not whither; taken, he knew not by whom; this was distraction! Snatched from out of his very protection that he had thought so secure! This was despair, loss of honour, loss of faithful guard, loss of her to whom he had devoted his life; this was death! He paced up and down with slow, mournful steps, between the two posts of his guard, inly groaning, one hand holding listlessly the handle of his francisque, which had proved so vain a weapon of defence to her, whilst with the other he wiped away from his forehead the heavy dewdrops of his anguish.

A distant sound reached his ear, and roused him from his painful abstraction. He raised his head, as would the horse at the sound of a trumpet. It was the call to duty, to action. He stood erect, listening. It came nearer, nearer, the wild galloping and snorting of fiery horses, the confusion of cries, the loud oaths of men.

'Ethelbert! Ethelbert!' shouted a well-known voice. It was that of the Antrusion, the noble Chararic.

'Here, my lord!' answered the young man in ready accents. He knew that, whatever might be his own self-accusations, the captain he revered and obeyed so faithfully would not tax him



with any want of will to do his duty, whatever he might say to his failure in the execution of it.

‘Thou must have thought me a long time coming, comrade,’ said the Antrusion as he rode up to him, directed by the young man’s voice. ‘I had ridden to the outguard on the Chalons road, whence I had received information of a strange party of horsemen, galloping past the sentinel posted there, without a sound on the road, and as I returned, I found Marcus the freedman at the palace, with tidings of this accursed affair. I would not have had it happen in the King’s absence for more than I can tell thee. A curse on the dreamy fool who sent for me on a fool’s errand, but for that I should have been here before, and we might, perchance, have caught the villains! How did all this manage to escape thy guard, Ethelbert? Thou dost not often give me the chance to call thy vigilance in question.’

‘Vigilance, my lord, would scarcely have availed aught in this matter. It has been a surprise, for which we were but little prepared. There has been a cave, or a secret entrance, discovered in the wall of Cæsar, through which, an I judge aright, these night prowlers must have come.’

‘A secret entrance in the wall of Cæsar! thou must be dreaming also, Ethelbert,’ exclaimed the Antrusion, almost sternly.

‘Pardon me, my lord. The cave exists. Two of my men guard it now. Come but this way, and thou mayest see where a large portion of the wall has fallen into the road.’

The Antrusion dismounted, and examined the wall as well as he might in the dark night. Soon, the men he had despatched for torches returned, and all made ready to search the cave. Before entering it, however, he searched the garden thoroughly, and caused the smiths he had sent for to replace the bolts and locks.

Arriving at the bronze gate at the head of the passage, the Antrusion went in, followed by Ethelbert, holding the torch, both tracking the ground carefully as they went, the footsteps of many men being plainly visible. They had followed these

tracks some considerable way down the passage when they suddenly ceased, and Ethelbert and the Antrusion threw up like hounds' at fault.

'I marvel the footprints cease,' said the Antrusion to Ethelbert. 'No, comrade; go no farther! Mark thou the spot where the tracks cease. Beyond, all others will be our own. But whither can they have passed? Vanish suddenly they could not!'

Ethelbert placed a mark where the footsteps ceased, and the party continued their way for another hundred yards without meeting with any further track, Alan Fergan having carefully obliterated in his first visit to the passage all traces of his steps. A colder air now making itself felt, gave warning of an opening at no great distance, either from above, or another entrance. It proved to be this last. A few minutes more and they emerged from it, forcing a way with much difficulty through so thick a brushwood, masking the entrance, that it was plain to see it had not been disturbed for many a long year. It was so close and stubborn it cost not a few sword cuts before they could penetrate its matted entanglement. Waving their torches, they advanced a few steps, and found themselves beneath a high rocky band, almost a cliff, skirting the road to Paris, not far from one of the outposts which the Antrusion had visited in his evening rounds.

The Antrusion was on the point of retracing his steps, when one of the men came towards him with something in his hand. 'This have I just found in the ditch on the hither side of the road,' he said, as he gave it into the Antrusion's hand.

'Ah!' he said as he took it, 'this seemeth a portion of a silver armilla; nor has it been long where thou didst find it. There is no speck of tarnish on its lustre.'

'It was in the long grass of the ditch. I saw it glisten as I held the torch over it. I deemed it worth the trouble of picking it up for thy inspection.'

'Certainly, comrade. I am well pleased to find thou hast a pair of quick eyes in thy head. This may prove of some future

service, even if we make nothing of it now. Come, my men, let us back to the city. Longer stay here avails us nought.'

They retraced their steps up the passage, and passing through the bronze gate, came out into the road. At this moment the galloping of a horse was heard to stop, and a voice asking in hurried tones for the Antrusion. The next instant a horseman rode up to Chararic and his party.

'Noble captain,' he said, 'the captain of the outpost on the Paris road, prays thou wilt with all speed come down to him. Some two hours since the sentry on guard saw a party of flying horsemen gallop past him. He swore they were in the clouds, for noise of footfall on the road there was none, yet must they have been on earth, for they passed close to him and he heard them speak. The man has affrighted all the guard, who swear the Valkyriors are riding the air.'

'Naught but truth then was it I heard from the sentry on the Chalons road,' said the Antrusion with vexation. 'No Valkyriors were they, but the very party who committed this outrage! It maddens me to be so close on their track, and yet not know it. Go, tell Hermanfrid to turn out a dozen men, mounted on the best horses in the royal stables. Quick, Ethelbert, bid them despatch! Thou, thyself, secure a horse that will not easily tire, and join me at the outpost on the Paris road. Thyself shall lead the chase!'

Ethelbert hurried off to execute this command, while the Antrusion, after he had placed fresh sentries at the garden gate, went thence to the east guard, and gave directions to Marcomir, left in command, to send out a patrol all round the circle of the guard. He then set off, accompanied by the messenger, to the outpost on the Paris road. He had not been there many minutes when Ethelbert joined him.

'I have made the dull fools understand at last,' he said to the young Frank, 'that it was a party of real horsemen the credulous ass saw pass him without the slightest effort to arrest them. Thou, follow on the Paris road; haste thee, but neglect not to obtain all the information thou canst, or thou wilt defeat thine own purpose. I may not leave the central guard, or I

would go with thee. Go not beyond Triocasses; after that pursuit were vain. Were it not that some fortunate accident to these marauders might delay their flight, to follow them at all were vain.'

Anything but inaction was welcome to the young captain of the east guard, and he set off with his men at a speed which augured ill for the fugitives should aught detain them. The Antrusion stood listening to the flying hoofs thundering along the Paris road, and then, leaving strict injunctions with the captain of the outpost to institute a minute search in the neighbourhood by earliest dawn, he returned to Soissons, and rejoined the central guard in its quarters at the palace. Several times during the night he rode out to hear always the same answer—'All is quiet!' And it was only when day broke that the weary chief indulged in a few hours of repose, much needed after all the disappointments and vexations of the night.

## CHAPTER V.

### *The Princess Llantildis.*

‘THE King’s captive gone? Disappeared from the House of Maidens? Nowhere to be found? Thou dreamest, child!’

‘No dream, gracious Princess, but good sooth. It is bruited through Soissons ere this. What will my lord the King say when on his return he heareth that she has been sought for in vain on all sides?’

‘He will say that, alive or dead, she shall be found; that her disappearance can be and shall be accounted for. He will say there is treachery at work; that vigilance has been relaxed. Who dare think that Chlovis will suffer his captive to disappear from the midst of the city; nay, from the precincts of the palace itself, and yet none have known how such violence was accomplished, or where she is now? His Armorican captive, whom he held of such importance that he placed her in a shelter he deemed alike sacred and inviolable! He will find it is not the inviolable refuge he believed it,’ she added, with a bitter smile. ‘Could it be,’ she inquired of herself, as a thought flashed across her mind, causing a bitter pang of jealous anger that made her cheek grow pale, ‘could Siegbert have done this? Could he have taken her by cunning when fair means failed him? He dare not brave the King’s anger by such madness. Woe be to him if he have thus trifled with my wrath! But yesterday how humbly he sued for my hand, a prize the King misdoubts is all too high for such as he; and to-day, behold, the dark eyes of an Armorican girl subvert his reason so that he is scarce worthy to be intrusted with her safe conduct the King charged him withal! But Siegbert is in the territory of the insolent Alemanni, where

the fatal francisque of the King is flashing on the banks of the Sala ! Should this treachery be his, the work he has appointed, woe be to him !' And the beautiful face of the Merovingian Princess clouded over with such an expression of jealous hatred as to make her appear more like a spirit of evil than a young and tender girl.

'Ah ! my lord the King will be wroth when he heareth of it,' resumed the Greek slave, quite unaware of the thoughts distorting the mind of her mistress. 'Tis said the holy Mother Anastasia is in despair. Ah ! the wrath of my lord the King is uncontrollable at times.'

'Is not the holy Mother above the wrath of princes?' asked Llantildis, with scorn. 'A Catholic, and not despise the wrath of man ! Knoweth she not the esteem in which the King holds her ? Was not this same charge, even the safe keeping of this maiden, the pledge of his confidence in her ? Perchance she feels she has not answered that confidence. Ah, a stern witness is conscience—not easily answered !' and Llantildis stopped short, as if her own words condemned her. 'This outrage—when took it place ?' she resumed, after a pause to regain her self-possession. 'Surely the Antrusion knew this ; might he not have told me ?'

'Pardon me, gracious Princess, but to none would he speak of it. E'en could he have had it otherwise, none would have known it. But people have eyes wherewith they see ; ears wherewith they hear.'

'Thou wouldst hear, if none else,' said the Princess, with emphasis. 'Proceed with thy tale.'

'Two days since, most gracious Princess, the virgins were in the garden. When the bell rang for evening prayers, all answered it save the Armorican captive.'

'How hadst thou this, Myrrha ? Is it not idle talk ?'

'Marcus, own freedman to the holy Mother Anastasia, told me, most gracious Princess. Something of this I had heard before, and meeting him, asked him of the truth thereof. My errand out was to have the recipe of the cosmetics made up, the same the illustrious matron Eudoxia gave me at Ravenna.

The holy Mother, he said, had sent him in quest of the Antrusion, who had caused the garden to be searched, messengers to be sent out on every road, and had given orders for the arrest of every person on whom suspicion might fall. 'Tis said the night witches rode past the sentry on the Chalons road, to arrest whom would be no easy matter.'

'How, Myrrha; thou a Catholic, and believest such tales? Hadst thou but spoken of the Valkyriors; these, indeed, the sentry might have seen. I am a Christian now, and discard such idle gossip!'

'Childish!' thought Myrrha; then added aloud, somewhat spitefully—'Childish or not, King Siegbert will have somewhat to say to them, be they Valkyriors or night witches.'

'King Siegbert!' exclaimed the Princess, her face flushing, her eyes flashing. 'Can the King of Ripuaria have ought to do with the captive of the royal Chlovis? Thou art impudent, slave, and shalt be whipped. Refrain thy speech to more discretion.'

The Greek slave never flinched, nor did she appear to notice this sudden outburst of anger, but went on with her occupation—that of combing and perfuming the long fair hair of the Merovingian Princess, guiltless of scissors since the birth of its owner. Yet her anger was roused, and her thoughts bitter. 'So I am to be whipped like Juba,' she inwardly communed. 'Bah! I am but a slave. Yet my ancestors were princes, kings, and demi-gods! And I—I comb the hair of a wild untutored barbarian, whose forefathers, not so many years since, had no better food than the acorns of their savage forests!' A scowl, bitter as her thoughts, flashed across the face of the Greek slave.

It was well for Myrrha that her mistress had been occupied, really with her own meditations, though apparently with the study of her face in a small mirror framed in gold and set with jewels, which she held in her hand. Had she chanced to catch a glimpse of Myrrha's face in that glass, she would have had a deeper insight into the character of her slave than she had hitherto cared to obtain.

‘Disappear and leave no trace,’ said Llantildis, too proud to show any further resentment—an emotion she had only betrayed because Myrrha’s last observation had been unexpected, and had stung her in her most sensitive point.

Myrrha saw in a moment an opening for another home thrust at the proud barbarian, who looked upon her in scarcely any higher light than that of one of the animals of her own menagerie. Truthful or not respecting the use she now chose to assign to the subterranean passage through which Iërne had been carried off, it suited her purpose better than she could have hoped. ‘Force,’ she said, ‘had opened the postern door of the garden and a subterranean passage in the wall of Cæsar leading to the Catalaunian road. It was the passage through which Count Egidius sallied when he repulsed the attack of King Chilperic, thy father of royal memory.’

The clear blue eyes of the Princess glittered with anger. She turned half round to where Myrrha stood, assiduously attending to the golden hair in her hands, and looking as meek and innocent as though she were quite unconscious of having galled her mistress to the quick.

‘Slave,’ cried the angry Frank, ‘wert thou not a thing so utterly insignificant and beneath my notice, such insolence! But there,’ she added, her anger calming down as suddenly as it had arisen, and resuming, as she spoke, the study of her face in her hand-mirror. ‘If fortune favoured the Roman consul that day, my royal brother has more than retrieved the ill fortune that befell the army of Chilperic. Where is Syagrius, the son of that same Egidius, the Roman King of Soissons? Could he withstand the onslaught of the royal Chlovis and his valorous Franks? Could the weak and pusillanimous Alaric the Visigoth, son of the great Euric, at whose nod the nations trembled, shelter the fugitive King from the wrath of the son of Chilperic? Syagrius died in prison a captive, caged like a mouse. And Chlovis reigns in the palace which once called him master, lord of all the riches it contains. Chlovis, chief of the Salian tribe! head of the Merovingian race, my royal brother!’ she added with increasing satisfaction. ‘It is a pleasant residence,



and very beautiful,' she continued, glancing round the room, 'and none the less pleasant and beautiful that it was wrested from the hands of the very men who had dared usurp my father's place in his own kingdom. Dost thou not think, Myrrha, it is a pleasant residence?' she asked, an ironical smile on her lips, her blue eyes glittering like steel, 'a pleasant residence for the daughter of Chilperic, my father of royal memory?' she mockingly added.

Myrrha prudently kept silence, certain that any answer she might give would be the worse for her, now that her mistress was so thoroughly roused. And she thought also she had aggravated her enough for one day, and it would perhaps be as well to give her time to recover the equanimity of her temper, a result she was more likely to attain in the complacent inspection of the room, which her eyes were now making, than in listening to anything her slave had to say.

The inspection might well have satisfied the most insatiate taste for splendour, if not the most fastidious in arrangement. It combined in its decorations and furniture all the elements necessary to make of it a *chef d'œuvre* of Greek and Roman art and luxury. On her return from Ravenna, where she had accompanied her sister Abolfleda on her marriage with Theodoric the Ostrogoth, the great King of Italy, Chlovis had given his sister Llantildis her choice of the rooms in the Palace of Syagrius. With an innate love of the beautiful, her taste for it had been still farther educated at Ravenna, where Theodoric not only maintained his own palace and grounds in all the beauty and splendour of its Roman masters, but preserved from the Romans themselves, wherever he could, all that remained of the former splendour of the nation. Llantildis, moreover, possessed the national taste for refinement so conspicuous amongst the Franks, cultivated by their long and close alliance with the Romans, whose love of the arts, order, and splendour, was as much an object of their ambitious imitation as were their laws and government.<sup>1</sup> It was this ambition which distinguished the nation of Llantildis amongst the barbarian tribes, and made the

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*.

Franks foremost in the progress of civilization, and indeed little behind the Romans themselves in their appreciation of art and luxury. Thus influenced, Llantildis had chosen the room in which she now sat. From the subject of the design and ornamentation chosen by its Greek decorator, it was supposed to have been the nuptial chamber of a former possessor of the palace, long since passed away. The marriage of Cupid and Psyche was portrayed on the pavement in delicate mosaics of coloured marbles, of an exquisite finish. This was framed round with a border, mixed of birds, animals, flowers, and fruits, in their natural colours, if not of natural size. This border, also in brilliant mosaic, was finished off in its turn by a broad border of blue and white marble intersected with gold. On the walls of the rooms were frescoes representing different groups of a bridal procession, divided into panels by wreaths of flowers and foliage, intermixed with fruit. The frame of the couch, with its soft cushions, its trailing coverlet, Babylonish in hue and texture, and rich with Asiatic needlework, was of bronze chased with gold, and chiselled with great delicacy of execution. Pillage and rapine had amassed, and tribute had swollen, the riches gathered from all the nations of the then known world, in this chamber of the barbarian Princess. Costly dressing cases were there, fitted up with all the inventions devised to aid and enhance charms more valuable than those riches to their owners, at a time when the dominion of a world often depended on the fairness and roundness of a woman's cheek, on the languor or brilliancy of a woman's eye, the abundance and glossiness of her hair, the insinuation of a glance, the persuasion of a smile, practised, how often! in those mirrors, heir-looms transmitted to female vanity, from the toilet table of a proud Vashti, or even of the Egyptian Circe, Cleopatra herself, for whose love a world had been counted well lost! Rare jewels sparkled in rich cases lined with silk; bracelets which had encircled the arms of queens, necklaces which had gleamed on the necks of empresses, if not on that of the dread Ceres herself; brooches were there which had clasped the imperial mantles of the conquerors of the world; perfumes of the most delicate odours, in bottles of strange

shapes and sizes, blue, white, and green glass, studded with beads of the same material but of darker hue ; cosmetics were there in boxes set with jewels ; plates of gold, now holding fruit, pillaged from Delphic treasures in Gaulish raids of bygone days, and now in their turn ravished from the ravishers by the men destined to replace them in the world. With these costly objects were mixed those of a ruder form and make, strings of amber beads from the shores of the Baltic, armillas of rude Saxon workmanship, fibulæ and rings from Armorican stores, gold serpents and ornaments of mystic shape and meaning, which had once perhaps decorated the person of an arch druid and proclaimed his dignity and preeminence in science. Rich furs were there, skins of sable, ermine, white wolf, black bear, lynx, brought by the ambassadors of the Heruli a present to Chlovis, the successful King of the Franks. These were thrown here and there in the chamber to correct by their soft warmth the coldness of the marble floor, if by any oversight or derangement of the apparatus the proper degree of heat was not maintained by the hypocaust beneath. This process of heating the room, as well as the entire palace, with hot air from the furnace below, did not prevent Llantildis from having a fire of logs burning brightly on the hearth of the chamber, a pleasant contrast to the cold grey sky without.

‘And yet,’ said Llantildis aloud, as if in answer to her own thoughts, ‘is this palace, with all its splendour, equal to the palace of Ravenna, overlooking the waters of the blue Adriatic? There, the sun ever shines ; there, vines and olives clothe the sides of the hills with a luxuriance unknown to this bleak climate ; there, orange and citron and lemon perfume the air with their pure white flowers. And lovely is the garden where Abolfleda walks at her pleasure, terrace beneath terrace down to the margin of the sea. There, it is warm, it is bright. Here, how cold, how dark!’ and she shuddered as she spoke. ‘Snow is so hateful, so cold, so white ! It is as though all were dead and wrapped in grave clothes. How bitter these east winds sweeping over this desolate country, over grim forests, where gaunt wolves are ever howling, grisly bears for ever ravening.

Shall I for ever dwell here? Queen it over some Court as rude and barbarous as this country, not go, like Abolfeda, the bride of a great king or emperor, to some warm and lovely country, and reign there, abitress over all, in virtue of my youth, my beauty, my royal blood? Am I not as fair as Abolfeda? fairer, younger than Ariadne, Empress of the East, who yet reigns there in virtue of her own right?’

‘She is as old as my grandmother Lois,’ said Myrrha, promptly; as she did when it suited her views to follow the train of thought in which she found her mistress. ‘And the Emperor Anastasius, what an old man he is? I would not be espoused to so old a man for the empire of the world!’

‘None know their power till the trial comes, Myrrha. Of what sacrifices might I not be capable to become Empress of Constantinople!—a far grander title than mere Queen of Italy.’

‘So would not I sacrifice one tittle,’ said Myrrha, quickly; ‘nor wish to live in a city where every one is killing every one, fighting and murdering one, when one thinks one is only going to see a beast fight or chariot race in the circus. When one does not know when one eats one’s supper whether one will be alive to eat one’s breakfast next morning. And if one escapes man, one escapes not the weather. Despite its blue smiling skies, its sunny seas, its beautiful groves, the most frightful storms sweep over it, carrying ruin and devastation everywhere. And then the earthquakes—*Kyrie eleison!* They bury, when they are at it, two or three cities at a time. My grandmother Lois has often told me of one which happened nigh fifty years ago. It lasted off and on nearly six months, and so upturned the sacred city of the East, that the Emperor and all his Court fled into the fields from the palace falling about their ears. The holy Proclus, who was then Archbishop, went out after them with all his clergy to console and comfort them. The earthquake was felt all over Egypt and Syria and Phrygia.’ Myrrha’s tongue ran glibly on such a marvellous topic. ‘The earth shook,’ she continued, ‘and tossed like a galley at sea, and the handsomest buildings in the city came clattering down as if the end of the world had come. It was

then, when all the Court was in the fields, that a boy was taken up with the air, and he heard the angels singing the Trisagion. The holy Proclus taught it to the people. They sing it still in the litanies, so I know it is true !'

'I always thought thee foolish and superstitious, Myrrha. But I attempt not to convince thee how idle are thy words,' said the Princess rising from her seat, whilst Myrrha removed the mantle enwrapping her shoulders during the process of the hair dressing. 'Yes,' she said, surveying herself in the hand-mirror she still held, 'that cross plait at the back of my head pleases me well. The circlet rests on it with ease.'

Myrrha had some reason to look on her own handiwork with satisfaction. The beautiful hair of the Princess, confined round the crown of her head with a gold circlet, enriched with precious stones, supported by the cross plait—Myrrha's last invention—escaped in thick waves of rippling gold down her back, more than half way to her heels. It was truly a noble ornament to any woman, and particularly becoming to the tall and slender form of the Sicambrian Princess. She wore a long robe of white samite, a sort of fine silk or taffetas, confined at the throat and waist with bands of silk embroidery of various colours, in which were also wrought small, or seed jewels. The sleeves, bordered all round with the same embroidery, fell back from the tip of her shoulders, displaying the delicately tinted skin of her fair round arm, on which Myrrha now proceeded to fasten bracelets of costly material and workmanship, adorning the fingers of her shapely hand with antique rings of great value. She was clasping on the right shoulder of Llantildis the cameo fastening of a blue silk peplum, or mantle, lined with swan's-down, when the curtains of woollen tapestry hanging before the door of the chamber were drawn aside, and a comely matron, with the characteristic features of the Roman race, entered the room, bearing a gold cup containing spiced wine, and a gold salver on which were some sweet biscuits.

'My good Leona,' said the Princess, to her favourite slave, and a truly beautiful smile relaxed her features, rather

stern and inflexible in repose, 'thinkest thou I am still within the fever grasp at Ravenna? The dinner hour is too near for those dainties. No!—then I will have some presently. Thou art welcome! Thou must be on my side. Myrrha tells me such horrors of the sacred city of Constantinople, as she calls it. It has fallen from her good graces to-day. But I forgot—thou art not likely to prefer it to Rome, where thou wouldst dwell, hadst thou the choice.'

'Pardon me, noble mistress,' replied the Roman slave, as she placed the cup and salver within reach of the Princess, gathering up for the purpose the ornaments scattered on the table in the process of choosing from them, 'there is one great reason why I would prefer to live at Constantinople for the present, than to live at Rome as it is now. Not,' she continued, in deprecation of the angry flush which overspread the face of the Princess, evoked by these words, 'because your noble brother, the great Theodoric, reigns there. I respect and venerate that great King, save for one thing. What do I not owe to him of grateful thanks!'

'Save for one thing, my good Leona,' said the Princess, smiling, pleased with the eulogium of her great brother-in-law. 'Because he is not a Catholic like thyself, but an heretical Arian, as thou wouldst call me also.'

'You apply those hard names to yourself, great Princess, although,' she added, devoutly crossing herself on the forehead, 'I may not deny them, unless I would prove unfaithful to the great Catholic truths so many sainted martyrs have sealed with their blood. My poor prayers go up for the royal Theodoric daily,' she continued, 'that the great gift of divine grace may be his one day. May I live to have the supreme joy of beholding him as fervent a Catholic as he is now fervent in his desire for the peace and prosperity of his kingdom, of the subjects God has committed to his charge!'

'My good Leona! How camest thou, who art so hard to us, the followers of Arius, to tend me as thou didst, with a mother's care, as I lay sick to death of the fever, at Ravenna? Ever since I knew thee, thou hast been as a mother to me, me,

who have hardly known a mother's love ! When I awoke from that long delirium to find all fled, fearing the fatal infection, thou wert there. Can I ever forget how thou didst watch and tend me in those long days, and yet longer nights ; no hand but thine to give the cooling drink to my parched lips, to bathe my hot forehead ? The greatest gift the noble Theodoric bestowed on me was the gift of thyself, dear Leona. Never could I understand what attracted so much unselfish devotion to my unworthy self. Nor had I ever seen a glimpse of thee till I awoke one morning from frightful dreams, to see thee sitting by my couch, deserted by all, save thee.'

'It is my duty, noble mistress, at all times, to do what I can to save the life of a fellow creature,' replied Leona, touched by the affectionate expression beaming on the face of the young Sicambrian, 'and I am grateful it was for you. Your soul also was in peril. I could not let you die without an effort to save you, knowing you to be outside the pale of the Catholic Church. I most fervently believe it pleased God to snatch you from death at that time, that some day you might become a glorious example of His goodness, and a devout daughter of His Church.'

'I may, Leona, I may ! There is something in thy speech stirs a better spirit in me, though it is lost again in the hurry and excitement around me. Yet I do not understand how thou couldst do all this for a follower of Arius, Leona, when, as thou hast told me, all the misfortunes of thy life were entailed on thee by such as I am.'

'Such is the teaching of our Divine Master, great Princess, to do good to those who despitefully use us. It is not in human nature entirely to forget all the evil man may do us, but it is our duty as Catholics to return good for evil, and forgive to the utmost of our power.'

'I fear I should never attain that height of perfection,' said Llantildis. 'I should not be satisfied till I had paid off to the uttermost farthing those who had wronged me. Now, look not so shocked, nor shake thy head, Leona ! I value thy admonitions ; thou art so fearless, and seemest to have the rare

courage of speaking the truth, let me be in my worst and most barbaric mood, as the good Remigius calls it.'

'Should I have flinched from giving you bitter medicines when you had the fever, noble Princess, or taken the cup away for that it was nauseous?'

'Perchance, one must sometimes take for one's own good what is not always pleasant to the taste,' returned the Princess, 'and I listen more willingly to thy speech, my good Leona, than to that of the Bishop Remigius. He calls me hard names sometimes, says I am proud, self-sufficient, self-seeking, and bestows other sweet qualities on me, says I lay snares for the souls of men, in that I like to dress well. I told the good Bishop I was but a benighted Arian, and how could he expect aught else from me?'



## CHAPTER VI.

### *The Palace of Soissons.*

LEONA had not time to answer this last sally of the versatile Princess. A scuffle was heard in the peristyle without—cries of childish anger, and then the door burst open, the tapestry was hastily pushed aside, and a beautiful boy, about seven years old, rushed into the room and flew to Llantildis.

‘Mother! mother!’ he cried, almost inarticulate with passion; ‘Juba is insolent; but for his size, I would have beaten him myself! I had him by the throat, but he slipped away from me, serpent that he is! He called me bastard!’ And the boy stamped in his rage, almost choked with the words he so rapidly poured out, clinging the while to the robe of Llantildis.

‘Take him away,’ almost shrieked the Princess. How is this? How came he in this room? I cannot bear the sight of him. Leona, take him up! carry him away! There is blood on my dress!’ And the Princess drew back from the child with a movement of terror.

Leona took the boy up in her arms, and tried to pacify him. The evident repugnance of Llantildis did not seem to check the child’s yearning to go to her, for he stretched out his arms towards her, with an action full of love and grace, crying out—

‘Mother! mother! send me not away from thee! Thou art my mother, my beautiful mother! Put me down, Leona; I will go to my beautiful mother. I want to kiss her. Put me down directly!’ and he struggled to get free.

The face of Llantildis paled; but Leona held the boy all the closer for his struggles, and hastily carried him from the

room, staunching as well as she could the blood oozing from a small wound in his hand, his cries of 'Mother! mother!' echoing along the peristyle and ringing like sharp steel through the ears of Llantildis.

Myrrha, on her knees before her mistress, wiped out the blood stain on the white silk dress of the Princess. Llantildis reached out her hand for the spiced wine Leona had brought in, and drinking it off hastily, sat, or rather dropped, down again on the seat from which she had risen.

Two of her attendant ladies, both noble Gauls, entered the room at this moment, and announced the arrival of her two guests, the ladies Julia and Marcia, whom they had left in the exedra, or reception-room. The Princess, now recovered from her late emotion, rose and went out, followed by her ladies and half a dozen captives, wearing gold collars, who waited outside.

In a distant part of the palace, devoted to the use of the young Prince, Leona sat, holding the boy on her knee. His cries of anger were now hushed, and he sat quietly looking on whilst she washed and dressed the wound on his hand, the result, he said, of a bite from one of Juba's monkeys.

'Thou knowest, Prince Theodoric, thou art not to play with Juba or his monkeys! He is an insolent, ill behaved monkey himself,' said the Roman matron, Nurtia, to whose care the young Prince had been intrusted, and whose duty it was to attend to him when the boy was not in the training school with the other lads of his age. 'The noble Comes would not be best pleased to hear that his royal pupil played in the peristyle with a scamp of a Moorish slave, and was shamefully bitten by so contemptible a brute as a monkey.'

'I but stood at the door,' said the boy, 'to see Juba go round on his hands and feet, and one of his monkeys flew at me. I beat him and chased him, and Juba chased me. Would I had strangled Juba when I had him by the throat, and but for that dog's collar of his he would be dead now! He said I was not the King's son!'

'Juba shall be well whipped for his insolence!' said Nurtia. 'Not the King's son? Thou knowest thou art! Heir to his

throne and power!' she added, impressively. 'See thou do nought unworthy of such rank!'

'The Comes ever tells me that,' answered the boy, proudly, 'and I mean to chastise Juba myself.'

'Let him be chastised by the master of the slaves, Prince, not by thy royal hand. Pernicious imp! his brutes fly at every one!'

'Now, good Nurtia,' said Leona, 'some of the balsam the holy Remigius gave thee for flesh wounds on this bite would heal it the sooner.'

'It vexes me,' said Nurtia, handing the box of ointment to Leona, 'that brute should have bitten Prince Theodoric. A venomous wound is the bite of an enraged monkey! I fear it will be of longer cure than the thrust from the young Count Hermanfrid's spear he received in the sham fight. The bath awaits thee, Prince, ever since thy return from the riding school; and see how hot and dusty thou art! An we use not our best expedition, the Lord Chamberlain and the noble Comes will be here to take thee in to dinner, and thou not ready!'

'That would be bad,' said the boy, laughing, 'seeing I am as hungry as a wolf!' Kissing Leona, who tenderly returned his caress, he left her knee and flew to Nurtia, clasped her round the neck, and kissing her repeatedly, rushed out by a door into the bath-room. Here a slave, an elderly man, waited to bathe him, whilst two boys, equally slaves, held towels fringed with gold, or prepared the linen underclothes of snowy whiteness and fineness of texture.

'I marvel not the Princess should shrink, affrighted, that the boy should call her mother,' said Leona, after the young Prince had disappeared in the bath-room. 'There is a blood stain on her soul, Myrrha could not wipe out as easily as the blood stain on her robe. The precious Blood of Christ the Lord—be His Name for ever extolled and magnified!—can alone cleanse that!'

'Ever vain and haughty, she brooks no rival in the heart of the King or her position in the palace. She was but twelve

when my lord the King brought his young wife home. The idol of her husband, the pride of her countrymen, how the Princess hated her beauty ! From the moment the birth of an heir to his power increased the King's affection for the beautiful Fritigildis, the Princess plotted to insure her ruin. That the boy should call her mother is a marvel to me, for she never testified aught but aversion for him !'

'She seems not entirely dead to the stings of conscience,' said Leona. 'Would the grace of God were poured into her heart ! How wretched the burden of such guilt as hers !'

'The King, of generous, trusting nature, was not easily moved. Yet constant waterdrops dint the hardest marble, and distorted circumstance blinds the noblest sight. Hence ensued that scene of jealous fury ; when the frenzied Queen seized the sword of the King, even as it hung by his side, and plunged it into her own bosom !'

'Was her innocence never established ?' asked Leona.

'Suspicion, so gradually roused, is not easily wiped out ; and in the turmoil of war, the excitement of battle, the reputation of a woman is but a hair in the balance. Of royal race, her kinsmen would have vindicated her honour, avenged her death. She was but a young girl, with her beauty for only dower ! My lord the King was but chief of the Sicambrii then, of the tribe of the Salians, and held Tournay for his only seat of power. It was before he defied the Count Syagrius to mortal combat——'

'And conquered him !' triumphantly shouted the young Prince, as he re-entered the room, fresh from his bath, and wrapped in a royal mantle of warm fur. 'Beat him, as I shall the Romans some day, and take their eagles and all their treasures !'

'Thy royal father has left thee none to beat !' said Nurtia. 'They are all friends now. Alemanni and Visigoths, or Armoricans, there are in plenty for thy spear, when thou art old enough !'

'Know thou, Nurtia, the Comes says I shall make a famous warrior. Three times this very day my spear pierced the mark on the target ! It was but yesterday I vanquished Hermanfrid

at throwing the lance, and to-day I cleared the leaping pole on Haco, my new steed, when Hermangild turned back in fear !' And the boy burst out into a merry peal of laughter.

'Bless thy young heart !' exclaimed his nurse, kissing him, as she next proceeded to comb and perfume his long, fair hair, brushing into shining ringlets this proud and distinctive mark of his race. 'When shall we have a gold circlet, Prince, to keep thy hair down ?' she asked.

'I am safe to have it, if I win all the prizes at the Field of Mars, next. How proud thou wilt be, Nurtia, to see me ride up to the platform where stands the King ; two Jarls leading my steed by the rein. Then shall I dismount, kneel before the King, and lay my sword at his feet. As he puts the gold circlet on my head, all the warriors will shout and clash their shields in my honour ! Thou mayest be sure I will do my best to win every prize, that is, in my own class ! The brother of Hermanfrid will have the sword and white shield of expectation. But then he is fifteen, and I but seven.'

'Bless the royal boy ! Thy ambition is growing fast ! But see, here is thy tunic,' said Nurtia, removing his wrapping mantle, thereby displaying the small form, clad in a white linen under tunic, embroidered with gold at the throat and sleeves. She then put on his woollen tunic, striped with the blended colours of the rainbow, the distinctive mark of his royalty. This she fastened round the waist with an embroidered belt clasped with gold, and with gold fibulæ at the throat and shoulders.

'Thou must win a gold chain next, Prince !' she continued during these operations. 'Thou wouldst like a chain like that of thy royal father !'

'I may not have that, Nurtia, till I have fought, at least my first battle, and won it. It is so foolish I may not grow faster ! Were I but old enough I should even now be with the King my father !'

'All in good time, my Prince ; have but a little patience ! There, now, thou art a regular little Jarl,' continued Nurtia, as she clasped the gold armillæ round his arms. 'Nor would thy

royal father approve it, wert thou not every inch a Sicambrian, a Merovingian Prince and conqueror, as himself !'

'Now for the sable boots, Luisia,' she said, addressing the slave handing her the different articles of the boy's dress as she required them. 'These are better than those thou didst wear yesterday ; those are too short in the leg ! Thou art growing such a tall young Prince ! Will not these be over warm for thee, should the triclinium be heated as yesterday ? Fetch hither the sandals with the stamped leather thongs, Luisia !'

'I do want to wear my new boots, Nurtia ! The King of the Heruli sent them on purpose. He killed all the sables himself ; and it took a goodly number to make them. The Ambassador told me how small a beast it was. I would rather a wolf or boar hunt than killing sables ! Wouldst not thou, Nurtia ?'

'Neither is my calling, fortunately,' she answered, laughing. 'But hark ! here is the noble Comes and the Lord Chamberlain,' she continued, as the steps of armed men were audible in the peristyle. Three knocks from a wand were next heard. A slave, waiting that signal, opened the door, and the Lord Chamberlain, advancing a few steps, bent the knee to the young Prince, and prayed him to attend the dinner awaiting his presence. The Comes then took the boy by the hand and led him out, preceded by the Lord Chamberlain, and followed by half-a-dozen pages, sons of Jarls, the procession closing with a guard of Frank soldiers. Chlovis was particular in the maintenance of ceremonial, impressing discipline of habit and thought on his followers, too prone to unruly manners and indecorous behaviour.

As they passed the atrium, or hall, occupied by the main guard, the warriors then on duty were already drawn up. They saluted the young Prince as he passed, clashing their shields, and shouting 'Theodoric ! Theodoric !' The child passed on, proudly drawing up his beautiful head, his long, fair hair floating in golden curls on his shoulders, the pride and admiration of the warriors, who had so often followed the floating hair of the Merovingian Kings, as they would have followed a

standard, in the thickest of the battle, in the press of slaughter. The same shout greeted the entrance of the child into the triclinium, where the accounts of his prowess in the training school<sup>h</sup> had already preceded him.

The rooms of the Palace of Syagrius, now called the Palace of Soissons, were all disposed on the ground floor, round a quadrangular court, surrounded on the inner side by a colonnade, or peristyle. In the centre of this court was a pond, or miniature lake, paved with coloured marble, in which jets of water continually played. Gold and silver fish swam in the sparkling liquid, warmed in winter to a tepid heat by the hypocaust below. Plants of great beauty and rarity filled up the sides of this artificial pond, and between the columns of the peristyle close to it stood boxes of mosaic work in coloured marbles, containing orange and oleander and citron bushes, heirlooms from the luxurious Roman Counts, former possessors of this palace, and brought from Italy, or Aquitania, at a great cost. Statues also of no mean art stood mixed with these bushes, whilst bronze lamps, filled with perfumed oil, hung in chains from the centre of each arch of the colonnade, to be lit as soon as it was in the least dusk—six slaves being told off for this service alone. It was along this peristyle that the officers and slaves serving the dinner of the Princess now hurried in the discharge of their various duties; and it was here that Juba and his monkeys still lingered, tumbling together, and doing all in their power to interrupt and harass the hurrying domestics.

‘Away with thee, African imp!’ growled more than one stumbling slave, as the boy and his monkeys turned up under their feet, or ran against them in swift chase of each other up and down the length of the peristyle; ‘ye shall be well whipped, all three of you, and sent back to your native woods; a mischievous lot!’ ‘There goes the dish of roast loirs into the fountain! Her Highness sent all the way to Ravenna for them on purpose to entertain the ladies Julia and Marcia to-day,’ exclaimed another, as Juba came out of his way to run full tilt at the dish. These loirs were a kind of wood squirrel, esteemed

a luxury at Ravenna, and considered a gift of distinction from the King to a noble. Juba grinned, showing a set of ivory teeth, all the whiter for their contrast to his swarthy cheek, and proceeded along the peristyle, in a series of evolutions on his hands and feet, as if in the exuberance of delight, closely imitated by one of the monkeys, the other being busily employed devouring a piece of the loir which had not been restored to the dish with the rest when the servants had arrested them in their rapid descent towards the fountain.

He was a fantastic sight, this imp of a boy, about thirteen, with large brown eyes and short curled black hair, twirling about in his Moorish costume. His dress was of spun silk, striped with crimson, yellow, and gold. His head was bare, except that a red fillet was bound amongst his crisp dark curls. He wore a collar of gold, like that of a dog, fastened at the throat by a jewelled padlock, in common with the rest of the captives, denoting they were for ransom, or for sale, should the coffers of their royal master lack replenishing. A crimson scarf, edged with gold fringe, confined his dress round his waist, whilst full trowsers of transparent shining stuff were fastened round his ankles with broad bands of gold, engraved with strange characters, as were also the bands of gold clasping his dark and well formed arms. He and Myrrha seemed on the best of terms, as she passed in and out of the sleeping chamber of the Princess, where she was superintending the female slaves, preparing it for the evening, or perhaps the after dinner siesta. Before this door Juba arrived in a series of whirls, every time some trick more mischievous than the others was completed, or some salutary remonstrance from the whip, carried by the overseer of the slaves, reminded the black guardian of the monkeys there was a limit to his vagaries.

'Let me go with thee, Myrrha,' he said to the Greek slave, as, her duties now finished, she passed, her veil thrown over her head and shoulders, on some private excursion of her own. 'Thou wilt not see *him* this afternoon,' he added, significantly; 'he is gone in there. It is his turn to-day,' he continued, pointing over his shoulder towards the triclinium.



‘See whom? Who is gone in there, thou most provoking monkey?’ said Myrrha, with a well pleased smile she could scarcely repress, whilst a bright colour tinged her pale olive cheek at this allusion to one, of whom, she could not deny to herself, she thought oftener than of any other.

‘Thou dost not know!’ he replied, saucily. ‘He does not twirl his lip fringe as the rest do, although it is handsomer than any. It is a pity to conceal such lips under a fringe of hair, eh, Myrrha!’

‘Away with thee for an imp!’ she said, not ill pleased with Juba’s hints. ‘Here they come to fetch you three monkeys for the after dinner sports. Go out with me, sayest thou? No, by my faith!’

‘Shall I give him a message from thee, Myrrha? Tell him which way thou art gone? ’Twere pity he should not take some trouble to meet thee sometimes, seeing how thou sparest none to cross his path! The noble Ethelbert should not lack for gratitude.’

‘Fare thee well, Juba,’ she said, as, smiling and nodding to him, she sped on her way down the peristyle, whilst Juba reluctantly obeyed his summons, and followed, with his monkeys, the messenger sent for him.

The laughter excited by the antics of Juba and his monkeys, restrained within the bounds of decorum during the presence of the Princess in the triclinium, with her guests and attendant ladies, grew into more boisterous merriment when they withdrew, and the beakers of mead were replenished for the further refreshment of the officers of the palace and those of the guard of the city, who had the privilege of dining in their turn with the Princess during the absence of the King. The young Prince Theodoric had been led off in spite of his remonstrances, and reconfided to the care of Nurtia; the Comes, his tutor, fearing a fresh bite for him in the excitement of the wild play likely to ensue between Juba and his monkeys and the jovial Franks.

The noise of their merriment did not reach as far as the exedra to which the Princess had retired with her ladies and guests. This room, well fitted for winter use by its southern

aspect, had its doors and windows guarded by heavy tapestry curtains. Soft woollen seats and divans, disposed about the room, invited to an acceptable repose after the fatigue of the dinner table.

Though of pure Gaulish blood, the ladies Julia and Marcia were both entitled by birth to the name and dignity of Roman. Their dress, their manners, their customs, all were Roman; even their language was the Latin tongue, though they had been obliged, by necessity of intercourse, to pick up the language of the Franks. Hence Llantildis and her guests were able to keep up a very animated gossip, though this was mainly owing to the application of the Gaulish ladies, which had made them proficient in the Frank tongue—a result the Princess had not attained, being too self-indulgent for any such mental labour as it required.

‘When dost thou expect thine illustrious kinsman, Prince Sigismer?’ inquired the Lady Julia, after they had duly discussed their dress, the fashions, and their neighbours.

‘The noble Chararic thinks soon,’ replied Llantildis; ‘some of his retinue and horses are already here.’

‘That pleases me well!’ said Marcia, the younger of her two guests. ‘We may, perchance, have some gaiety whilst he is here—a review, or hunting party. We have been so dull since the King left, and took away all our admirers to fight those horrid Alemanni. Count Chararic is so taken up with his duties, he has no time to think of pleasure. He must exert himself now to provide entertainment for the foreign Prince. We may, perchance, have a pantomime, or a chariot race in the circus. Perhaps Prince Sigismer may bring some wild beasts—a tiger or two, or a lion. I should so like to see a beast fight!’

‘My dearest Marcia,’ interposed the Princess, ‘lions and tigers come from Carthage, not from Constantinople. Had we any wild beasts, the King would not allow them to fight. The Archbishop Remigius tells him it makes the people cruel—nourishes an unhealthy excitement. We are more likely to have a hunting party, and then there is the Field of Mars when

the King returns. Thou mayest for certain expect my royal brother then, should naught unforeseen detain him. The twenty-first of March is not far off now.'

'May it be propitious weather and not rain that day! I have such a lovely robe and new peplum to wear! Should it prove cold I have certainly some handsome furs'—and Marcia would have proceeded to detail her wealth in beast skins, but that the Princess hastened to prevent her, knowing her powers of eloquence on such subjects.

'Without doubt we shall have all manner of gaiety when the Gothic Prince arrives. There is danger for your hearts, ladies,' she said, smiling. 'They account him very handsome.'

'Hast thou never seen him, Highness?' asked the Lady Julia. 'Didst thou not say he was thy cousin?'

'Yes, but this is his first visit to us. The valiant Merovæus, my grandfather, had a brother who went to the East and married a Gothic Princess of the house of Amali. His son, my father's cousin, was in command of the Emperor's bodyguard when Prince Sigismer was born at Constantinople. The Prince, next in command to his father now, is on leave, partly to see the King and my poor self, partly on a quest to Britain, where he goes to seek some dogs of a fierce breed peculiar to that country. They are for the Emperor Anastasius.'

'Is the Prince young?' asked the Lady Marcia.

'Twenty-six, the age of my brother the King,' answered the Princess, laughing; 'not so old yet! He is already a distinguished warrior. The King esteems him highly.'

'Could we not go for a chariot drive?' suggested the Lady Marcia. 'Perchance we should see what preparations were making to receive him; perchance meet him on the road.'

'Oh! it is too cold!' replied the Princess, shuddering; 'such bitter weather! Let us rather have the tables or the dice. I would send for the Greek slave to sing to the lute, were it not so insipid an entertainment. Let us go and see the menagerie and the cage full of loirs, which the King of Italy sent to me. Then there is the aviary and the grey parrot, which the noble Aurelian brought from Mauritania on his return from an embassy

to King Alaric. It talks as if it were a man, and gives the word of command to the guards, you would say it was the Antrustion himself speaking. It is a marvellous creature!’

They were all rising to carry out this appropriate suggestion, when the blast of a trumpet sounded long, but apparently still at some distance. They all three paused to listen—parrot, loirs, and all forgotten in this new excitement.

‘It is the King!’ exclaimed the Lady Julia.

‘It is Prince Sigismer!’ said Llantildis, changing colour. ‘It is not the horn of a Merovingian Prince, but the blast of a Prince of the house of Amali!’

‘Can you distinguish so nicely?’ asked Marcia, in surprise.

‘Oh! yes!’ answered the Princess; ‘with the first I am acquainted from childhood. I became familiar with the second during my stay at Ravenna. My great brother-in-law, the Gothic King of Italy, is a Prince of the house of Amali.’

Again came the prolonged sound of the trumpet, drawing nearer, then the tramp of horses, the clashing of shields, the loud shouts of the guards in the outer courts of the palace, as they welcomed the royal stranger. Then came the hurrying of feet of the officers of the palace, as they passed along the peristyle on their way to receive the illustrious guest in a manner befitting his rank and the credit of the Court of Soissons.

‘I hope he will be at supper to-night,’ said the Lady Marcia.

‘Of course he will!’ said the Princess, with a flush of joyous anticipation on her fair cheek. ‘Would you like to come to my chamber and freshen the lustre and perfume of your hair? Myrrha and her companions shall attend on us. Supper will be at six o’clock to-day, as it always is at this time of the year, and as there is yet some time to the setting of the sun, we can have some fruit and spiced wine in my chamber. I will send Leona to inquire whether there will be any extra entertainment or music.’

As these propositions seemed very suitable for the occasion, the ladies left the exedra, and sailing across the now deserted peristyle, like a bevy of graceful water birds of various plumage, disappeared one after another into the sleeping apartments of the Princess and her retinue, on the south-west side of the palace.

## CHAPTER VII.

### *The Wolf Hunt.*

BEFORE they reached the suburbs of the city, Sigismer halted his train, and calling for his armour bearer, took off and gave to him the close morion he had worn on his journey, and shaking out his long fair hair he proceeded to smooth it down with an ivory comb, handed to him for the purpose by another attendant. This operation finished, he received from his armour bearer, and put on, his helmet enriched with a gold circlet, set with jewels, symbols of his rank and prowess, surmounted with the crest of the Merovingian race, the white sea horse rising as if to breast the waves. <sup>1</sup>His bright and ponderous francisque, or battleaxe, hung at his saddle bow, whilst a long sword was suspended from his shoulder in a belt, richly embroidered with coloured silks intermixed with gems and gold threads. His woollen tunic, striped in colours, scarcely reached below the knee, the thick plaits of its ample width confined at the waist with a belt of gold, clasped with a massive buckle of the same metal. A short purple cloak, trimmed with sable, was fastened on his right shoulder with a brooch formed of one large emerald set in gold of the finest workmanship, the latest gift of the Emperor Anastasius to his faithful soldier for services rendered in his last campaign against the Huns and Gepidæ, no longer kept in awe by the powerful arm of Theodoric, now peaceably settled at Ravenna in a kingdom of his own. The gold chain of the Roman Eques glittered round his neck, his left hand held the embroidered bridal rein, whilst on the wrist of his right hand he carried a noble falcon hooded and fastened by a delicate but firmly linked chain to the gold armilla that clasped his arm.

<sup>1</sup> Sidonius Apollinarius.

Thus accoutred, Sigismer rode into Soissons, eliciting shouts of admiration from the inhabitants by his gallant bearing, as he passed through the crowds gathering in haste from all quarters of the city to witness the passage of the Greco-Gothic Prince and his train. But the climax of enthusiastic welcome was reserved for the moment when he entered the outer court of the palace of Chlovis. The long fair hair of his race, his Sicambrian features, not unlike those of his royal cousin (save for the deeper hue of his large well set eyes, more nearly violet than dark grey), aroused easily the quick enthusiasm of the Frank guards. They clashed their shields and their swords with a vigour equal to their delight, and as the young stranger rode round the court to reach the door of the palace, loud and prolonged shouts arose to welcome this foreign offshoot of the royal race.

'Merovæus, Merovæus, the white sea horse! Sigismer! Sigismer! the white sea horse!' rose the clamorous shouts on all sides.

The Antrusion, left in command of the palace and city by the absent King, the Lord Chamberlain Bibrax, the Comes Ariovistus, as well as all the civil officers of the palace, these last being exclusively Romanized Gauls, received, as he dismounted, the royal guest, who represented in his person the two most renowned families in Europe at that time, that of the Amali (or immaculate) through his mother, and that of the Merovingians by his father, son of a brother of Merovæus, who had entered the Roman service, and passed to the East whilst his tribe and people were yet settled beyond the Rhine.

Whilst the Prince entered the palace, preceded and followed by the guards and officers of Chlovis, his horses and retinue excited loud comments of praise and admiration amongst the remaining Franks. A couple of dogs, somewhat of the water spaniel breed, led in a leash by one of the Eastern slaves, were objects of much curiosity and surprise, as was also the bird,<sup>2</sup> hitherto unknown to them, which the Prince carried on his wrist. These furnished topics enough of discussion in the

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon. See "Lombards."

guard room that evening, where, also, were not wanting some expressions of disapprobation that a warrior, and a Sicambrian to boot, should encumber his warlike train with animals apparently so useless, unless, as one suggested, they were presents for the Princess, and to be put in the collection she was forming like that which she had seen at the royal palace at Ravenna, and to which it was considered by all the Franks a great honour and privilege to contribute.

If the reception of Sigismer had been all that he could have desired outside the palace, he met with one no less cordial within. His easy grace and knightly polish, contracted in the Court within whose precincts he was born, struck the ruder Franks with a feeling akin to respect, if not to awe, and seemed to act in some sort as a restraint on their wild sallies. These qualities in her royal cousin captivated Llantildis, who had never met such before even in the Court of Ravenna, where the old Roman etiquette and ceremonial were kept up as closely as the new King of Italy could enforce. The evident admiration of the young warrior for the charms of his fair cousin, was tempered with a respect inherited from and through the traditions of his northern race,<sup>3</sup> who looked on female beauty as a kind of inspiration from Heaven, and to be venerated accordingly. On her side, the Princess was not deficient in the dignity of her reception of her royal kinsman. With ideas enlarged and improved by her residence in the Court of her brother-in-law, where a new world opened up to her, and with feminine capacity of ready adaptation to persons and circumstances, she maintained a conversation with her princely guest with an ease and dignified equality which astonished not a little her ladies and attendants, witnesses hitherto only of her languid indifference, her haughty reserve, her petulant humours or capricious outbreaks. A subject of animated conversation was the strange bird, brought in again at the desire of the Princess as they still sat at the supper table.

‘It is a beautiful creature,’ she said, stroking the glossy plumage of the falcon, as it sat with a proud bearing on the

<sup>3</sup> Gibbon. “Franks.”

wrist of its master. He was greatly pleased with the admiration she bestowed on his favourite, admiring the while her small hand passing to and fro in fair contrast to the dark bird she was caressing.

‘I rejoice that thou approvest the royal bird,’ he said, ‘thou wilt be enchanted with it when thou seest it in pursuit of its prey. It comes from Scythia, a bleak, cold, savage country on the borders of the Euxine. The inhabitants use it quite commonly in the chase. The young are taken as fledglings out of the nests, or eyries as we call them, built on the almost inaccessible cliffs overhanging the sea shore, and to be obtained only by the boldest of the natives. The young birds are then gradually reclaimed and carefully trained by their captors, and sold to the warlike tribes of the neighbouring countries, who are always on horseback and in the field, sometimes hunting, still oftener fighting. I have brought several of them as a present to my royal kinsman.’

‘Chlovis will be well pleased,’ replied the Princess. ‘Didst thou bring them all from Scythia, or only this one?’

‘Only this one, the rest I sent for. It was in one of our expeditions against those restless Scythians that I fell in with this bird. I have had some before, but none equal to this in strength of wing, or impetuosity of the dart, in energy of ascent, or swiftness of swoop. It is a gyrfalcon of the purest breed, and not to be always obtained. I have had rare sport with this bird in the marshes of Pannonia, on the borders of the Bosphorus, or banks of the Danube. Herons are plentiful there. Have you any herons in these parts? I should think there must be where there are such marshes.’

‘What are herons, noble Prince?’ asked Chararic, who had been intently listening to Sigismer as he described the habits and nature of his bird, and keenly attentive at the mention of a new sport.

‘They live chiefly in marshes, noble Jarl. They are a solitary sort of bird. I have never yet seen two together. They appear as if wrapped in contemplation, standing on a rock or stone in the midst of a pool or on the margin of a lake,



watching for fish as they swim past, or frogs as they leap from the rushes into the water. They have long thin legs, which cause them to stand rather high; a long sharp beak, very much like a spike, a long neck, and a graceful plumage of long waving feathers, which are worn as trophies by the sportsmen skilled in the science of this chase.'

'I do not remember noticing any bird of the sort your Highness describes, about here,' answered the Antrusion. 'Have any of you, valiant companions, ever seen any bird of such description?' he asked, raising his voice a little and addressing the young Frank officers sitting a little lower down the room.

'I have seen one, saving your respect, noble captain,' answered Ethelbert, whose turn it was, with others of his comrades, to dine and sup at the palace that day. 'Dost thou remember that small lake we passed the day we chased the Edui over the hills above Auxerre?'

'Well done, Ethelbert!' burst from his companions in a fit of loud laughter, scarcely to be repressed even by the presence of the Princess and her illustrious guest.

'Let me finish my story before you break out into your foolish gibes,' returned Ethelbert, rather moved out of his usual self-control by the rudeness of their manners, at such a time and in such a place. 'Rememberest thou, noble captain? there is a small lake about two miles from this, formed by the bend of the river. We passed it just after we came out of the forest, on this side of the Chalons road. Thou didst say—"An excellent place for a bathe in summer."'

'I remember the lake quite well. Didst thou see the bird there?'

'Even as thou didst speak. It was standing on a stone by the edge of the water, as still as the statue of Thor on the hill of rest. Its description answers exactly to the one his Highness has given of the heron. The moment it caught sight of us it rose and flew away with a loud cry, and thou askedst—"What was that?"'

‘Ja wohl! ja wohl!’ now burst from his companions. ‘Waeshaël for Ethelbert! Ethelbert the contemplative! Ethelbert the heron!’ they exclaimed.

‘Ay! but the hawk is yet to be hatched that is to get the better of such a heron as Ethelbert has proved himself more than once by flood and field, as you well know, all of you!’ interrupted the Antrusion, not unobservant of the indignant flash in the eyes of the young captain of the east guard, nettled in spite of himself by their rude attempts to ridicule him in the presence of the Princess and the ladies, although he knew it was only a slight feeling of jealousy on their part at his being thus brought into notice before the Eastern Prince, by powers of observation they were too careless to cultivate.

Sigismar, accustomed to the policy of conciliation amongst the unruly young spirits of the guard rooms at Constantinople, hastened to divert the conversation from a channel likely enough to prove unpleasant if persisted in. Addressing the Princess he said—

‘Shall we search the borders of this lake, fair cousin, for a prey for this noble falcon? It is a sport well fitted in every way to please noble ladies. It requires skill and patience and judgment, and is not so rough pastime that boar or wolf chase proves. It would well repay thee for the toil and weariness of the way.’

So welcome a proposition was received with exclamations of delight, and cries of ‘To-morrow, to-morrow,’ not only from the Princess, but also from the Frank nobles and the officers of the palace, all eager to witness a sport hitherto unknown to them.<sup>4</sup>

‘If it may please your Highness, fair Princess,’ said the Antrusion, ‘would it not be best to give the illustrious Prince the opportunity of joining in the wolf hunt commanded for to-morrow in honour of his arrival? It is getting rather too late in the season for wolf hunting to admit of our putting it off, and we may have more favourable weather in a day or two for the sport with the noble gyrfalcon and this same strange heron.’

<sup>4</sup> Gibbon. See “Lombards.”

'This present weather suits admirably for hawking, valiant Jarl,' answered the Prince, 'and this month of March is most favourable. In the more advanced spring the heron is not so easily found, and is wilder when seen. It is then busy rearing and feeding its young, an occupation that takes it much away from its usual haunts. But as the wolf hunt has been commanded by your courtesy for my entertainment, the hawking party can be put off, under your pleasure, fair cousin,' added the Prince, turning to Llantildis, 'if it be no disappointment to you.'

'No disappointment,' she answered, 'for we can go another day. Besides, I shall go with thee to the wolf hunt. There are places in the forest, openings and long glades, where I can see a great deal of it. I always go; I have a tent pitched, with sheepskin linings to keep me from the cold, and the intendant of the palace will send wine and meat and pasties for the refectation of all engaged in the hunt.'

The applause which greeted this announcement was spontaneous; the anticipation of 'the fun,' amongst the young officers, and discussions on the prognostics of the weather, furnished animated conversation for the rest of the evening.

Great, also, was the bustle and excitement next morning both inside and outside the palace, to forward the important preparations for the forthcoming hunt. There was much running to and fro of equerries, squires, and pages, all men of noble birth, all freemen or Franks. The grooms and meaner attendants were slaves, though amongst these were even men of noble birth, reduced to so low an estate by the fortune of war or the right of conquest. Such adverse circumstances, however, did not seem to diminish their interest in the preparation for a sport in which they all promised themselves to have a part. Though the Princess was in high good humour with herself, the weather, the gallant Prince, and the joyous anticipations of all the pleasure and the excitement to which his presence was likely to give rise, Myrrha did not yet find it an easy task to please her in the choice either of dress or ornaments suited to the importance of the occasion. Vexed and fretted with the

fastidiousness and caprice of her royal mistress, as well as with private disappointments of her own, more than one tear stole down her cheek. This was an unusual state of things with the astute Greek, and only to be fully accounted for by the vexation of her having been seen by the young captain of the east guard, as he passed, the evening before, to and from the supper table in the palace, in the act of flirting and joking with one of the attendants of the Eastern Prince. To lose the smile, however grave, which he generally bestowed on her as he passed, was a disappointment of greater importance to Myrrha than she cared to confess, and the great source of her state of depression this morning. 'How stupid she had been!' so ran her thoughts, 'to have stopped in that spot; she knew he would pass there! Or rather, how tiresome it was any one should have joined her at that time!' No doubt it was this preoccupation of her thoughts which caused her to be so often rebuked for her inattention by her imperious mistress, and right glad was Myrrha when the Princess at last considered her toilette finished, and left the room with the ladies waiting for her.

Myrrha hastened out into the peristyle, with a faint hope of she knew not what. Perhaps it was that, in all the passings to and fro, she might see the very one she most desired to see.

'Though I dare say he has passed more than once, whilst that vain tiresome creature kept me there upon my knees, settling the folds of her robe, or choosing bracelet after bracelet that never pleased. I wish she might lose them in the forest, only I know that would not vex her—she has so many! Calling me slave! and minion! beating me, as if I were a dog, and not a Catholic, which she is not! Were she but my slave, would I not pay her off! And such things have happened before now, where the slave has become the master. But then I have no such luck, or luck of any sort,' she added, whilst tears of mingled anger and disappointment now rolled fast down her cheeks.

A quick step coming down the peristyle attracted Myrrha's attention. Turning hastily in the direction of the sound, her heart beat with joyous exultation as she saw Ethelbert advancing

on his way to join the hunt, from a conference, now over, with the Antrusion, to which he had been hastily summoned. She took care not to dry her tears, hoping that the sight of them might touch his heart, perhaps obtain a word of delightful consolation from his awakened sympathy.

Nor was she deceived in her hope. Ethelbert, the evening before, absorbed as he was in thoughts far away, had scarcely noticed any one standing near the spot where he had passed, with the grave looks which Myrrha had attributed to his displeasure at her levity, but of kindly sympathy with all in distress, stopped when he noticed Myrrha was in tears—a flood of which on his approach she contrived to pour out in renewed abundance. She felt, by the thrill which shot through her heart as he took her hand, with soft, gentle touch, how dear to her was commiseration from him, how gladly she would purchase such sympathy at a price much higher than she had paid for it that morning.

He could scarcely glean from the words she faltered out the real cause of her sorrow, except that it was the undeserved correction she had received from her mistress, the measure of which she also skilfully aggravated to him for this opportune occasion. He spoke to her kindly, as he would have done to a sobbing child, and, with a gentle compassionating pressure of her hand, passed on his way, little aware of the delight of Myrrha's heart at such a demonstration on his part, nor of her ascribing to his act a motive, so entirely different to that which really prompted it.

'He is good as he is handsome and brave,' she said to herself, looking after him in an ecstasy of joy till he had disappeared. And her thoughts dwelt on this slight incident till it assumed an importance in her eyes, ever increasing, long after he had forgotten her very existence.

It was a gallant sight to witness the hunt ride out of the palace courts; at least, so seemed to think the crowd thronging to catch a glimpse of the Eastern Prince and the beautiful Frank Princess, the report having quickly spread that despite the east wind and occasional sprinkling of snow, she would

grace the hunt with her presence. Loud were the shouts as the chariots drew near in which the Princess and her ladies proceeded to the forest, Sigismer riding beside that containing the Princess. In common with the Frank hunters, he wore on this occasion a tight-fitting tunic of carefully prepared leather, cloth boots reaching up to his knees, bound round the leg with numerous thongs of leather, dyed and stamped. All the hunters were armed with sharp hunting spears and short swords hanging in sheaths close to their sides. They all wore over their shoulders, strapped close in at throat and waist, skins of beasts, trophies of some former hunt, tanned and prepared to a silky softness. Sigismer wore for this part of his equipment a magnificent tiger skin, of more than usual brilliancy of colour and dimension. This skin was a novelty to the Franks, and new even to some of the Gauls, to whom circus and triumph no longer offered such beasts to view—trophies of conquest or tribute from far off countries. No animal of these northern regions could vie in richness of colour with the fur of this denizen of Asiatic forests. The claws were sheathed in gold, the fore paws clasped on the breast of its wearer. But the greatest wonder was the head of the terrible monster, stuffed in exact imitation of life; its eyes set with a species of pale emerald, emitting a greenish glare. The grinning jaws displayed the pointed teeth, sharp as poniards and white as ivory. This ferocious looking head was lying at present on the shoulders of the Eastern warrior, but could be worn, at will, as a headpiece, fastening under the chin with narrow straps covered with gold scales, attached to the lower jaw for the purpose. At the earnest entreaties of Llantildis, he put it on, and turned to her with a mien so terrible and menacing, that she gazed on his face with a sort of fascination not devoid of fear, whilst the ladies Julia and Marcia shrieked aloud with fright. His young face, thus overshadowed by the head of the grinning monster, assumed a ferocity kindred to its dread features, and his eyes, soft and smiling when in friendly conversation, especially when addressing the Princess, now emitted flashes of wild anger, gleaming as they might gleam in the fury

of mortal combat. Although this was but momentarily assumed for the amusement of the Princess and her ladies, it was a little too like possible reality to be looked upon without emotion. The Antrusion caught a glimpse of the fierce look, and exclaimed to himself—

‘By Odin and all the Valkyriors! but that is the look of a right fierce warrior. He were like to play the tiger to some purpose, if the occasion offered!’

‘Keep it on!’ begged the Princess. ‘Was he not a terrible monster to kill?’

‘I did not kill it, most beautiful Princess,’ answered Sigismar, well pleased with his fair cousin’s looks of animation and delight. ‘Nor should I wear it to-day as a hunting trophy, but I could not resist the desire of displaying, in your eyes, so beautiful a prize, being, as it is, “captive of my bow and spear.” It was found in the tent of a Bulgarian general, whose camp we surprised, seizing all their arms and war furniture. This prize fell to me in my share of the spoils; perhaps,’ he added, with pleasing modesty, ‘because they chose to say that it was owing to a little extra vigilance on my part that the enemy at that time received a signal defeat. Whence the barbarian had it, I cannot tell. Perchance it was a prey in some Armenian raid, or payment as part ransom for some illustrious captive.’

Rapturous shouts of delight at the sight of the ‘Tiger Prince’ arose from the troop of boy hunters whom the Comes Ariovistus was vainly trying to marshal into some sort of order. Mounted on his fiery Frank steed, he rode hither and thither, repressing the ranks on this side, only to see them break out on the other. The wild spirits of their race had broken bounds amongst this young troop, the oldest of whom was scarcely fifteen, the youngest only just seven. Foremost, and amidst the wildest spirits, rode Theodoric, in a close hunting suit; on his shoulders the skin of a wolf he had killed with his own spear. But few of his companions possessed such a trophy; and right proud the owners of such a distinction, the envy of their less te companions. Haco, the Norwegian pony on which

the young Prince was riding, seemed in spirits as wild as its master, and, urged and curbed by his rider, curvetted and bounded, rushing off in mad career whenever he could get a chance. The Comes shook his head at the wild vagaries of the mad troop; but as they were all bound for what young and old considered the 'best fun in the world,' he made a virtue of necessity, and relaxing a little of that authority wherewith he enforced obedience in the training school, he contented himself with a few words of remonstrance.

'How dost thou expect another wolf skin to-day, Theodoric, if thou and Haco expend your energies before you reach the forest? Hermanric, be careful! Thou didst nearly upset that good old lady, come hither to see if thou dost ride as well as last hunt. Carnaric, do not be so heedless; gather up your bridle, sir Count, let it not hang in that loose manner, and sit less stiffly in your saddle! Valiant Ethelbert, do me the favour to bring up the rearmost of these excited youngsters. I expect we shall have something to do to keep them in anything like control when Herr Wolf is galloping about the forest!' These last words being addressed to the young captain of the east guard, glad enough of the anticipated excitement, and perchance the danger of the wolf hunt, to divert his thoughts from the painful channel in which they had run ever since the disastrous evening when the noble Ierne had been carried off, and in which he and his comrades had returned from their bootless pursuit.

The tent, lined with sheep skins, was pitched in an open space, some distance in the deeper parts of the forest, and proved a delightful shelter from the cold. Care had been taken that its opening should not face the east, whence came the wind, bitter and fierce, and it was an acceptable refuge to the Princess and her ladies whenever the hunt disappeared in the distance, and the lack of excitement made them more sensitive to the cold outside. Soft skins and wraps of all kinds contributed to their warmth and comfort. The Princess, for her share, wore, wrapt round her fair shoulders, the beautiful tiger skin which Sigismer had devoted to that purpose.



'I must leave it in the tent,' he said, 'it would be impossible to get through the underwood with it on, not to speak of its heat in the hard riding I hope to have. And only think,' he added, 'how much more valuable it will be to me after it has served as a protection to thee from the cold!'

There was no resisting such an argument, accompanied as it was by looks and tones, far more persuasive than the mere words. So Llantildis had allowed him to put it round her. As she sat there after he had departed with the rest of the hunt, propped up with cushions, her hand playing with the golden claws of the once formidable animal, her thoughts were as busy as her outward appearance seemed idle and listless. She could not deny to herself that she was dazzled by the youth, the beauty, the bearing of her princely kinsman, as well as by the renown of his valour. She felt fascinated, moreover, by the indication, slight as it was, and displayed merely in jest, of the fiercer spirit lurking beneath so smiling an outside. She saw how possible might become, if she so chose it, the playful insinuations of her friends, whilst awaiting the arrival of her princely cousin. She might, if she so willed it, return to Constantinople with him. But would she will it? Would it suit her ambition? At Constantinople she would only be the wife of Sigismer, the renowned captain of the Emperor's body guard, *one* of the most conspicuous ladies of the Court of the Empress Ariadne, not the first. Were her brother's views carried out for her as successfully as he wished, she would be Queen of her own Court, could influence her husband, rule his counsels, control events. She was too nearly allied with Chlovis in race and blood not to partake largely of his disposition as a ruler. Even as the wife of Theodoric of Ravenna, had his choice lighted on her, instead of on her meek, gentle sister, she would not have been all she desired. Theodoric was a conqueror, the founder of a new monarchy, a ruling spirit; one who would brook no equal in his wife, far less a controlling genius. As the Burgundian Gundovald had hitherto rejected the marriage negotiations of Chlovis, there seemed no longer much prospect in that quarter for Llantildis, and her brother hardly cared to sacrifice

her beauty and grace for the slight advantages likely to accrue from her marriage with Siegbert of Cologne. Yet Siegbert was a Merovingian of pure race, and in default of direct heirs to the power of Chlovis, Llantildis, as wife of the King of Cologne, might one day reign in Soissons, and see her sons heirs to the dignities now enjoyed by her brother. This was certainly an advantage not to be altogether overlooked by her. The question was, whether the chance was not so remote as to lose some of the weight it might otherwise have possessed in its influence on her decisions.

As she lay there pondering these things, Llantildis somewhat resembled a beautiful tiger-cat, which its trusting master might fondly believe he had tamed. Fully aware of her own powers of mind, which had they been better controlled and directed would have rendered her really fit to govern, she wore the golden circlet of her rank with a conscious power and proud defiance which had its charm for Sigismer. Disappointed at Constantinople in his ideas—derived from the traditions of his northern race—as to what women should be : disgusted, if not offended, by the effeminate—not feminine—qualities of most of the ladies at the Greek Court, he felt that Llantildis came nearer his standard of feminine perfection than any woman he had as yet met. Joyously remembering her courtesy, her grace and womanly condescension towards himself, he entered into the excitement of the hunt with an animation and a will that more than one wolf had to rue that day. The ‘find’ had been a great success. Closely hemmed in by the men on foot, or ‘beaters,’ the wolves had been driven out of their hiding-places to the more open parts of the forest. Closely pursued by the men on horseback, the brutes, driven to desperation, fled blindly through the glades, and were now fast approaching the direction in which lay the tent of sheep skins. There was more than usual excitement amongst the hunters. Several she wolves had been intercepted and driven down with the rest of the pack. These, inspired by their maternal instinct, raged with a wild fury in their anxious terror for the safety of their cubs. Just as they were being driven by the hunters down a broad path leading

away from the tent, but sufficiently in view of it for the ladies to witness the passage of the hunters, the pack divided, and about a dozen wolves, amongst which were a couple of these now maddened females, rushed down close to the tent, by taking a sharper turn to the left. Llantildis and the ladies were standing outside, roused by the near approach of the hunt, and the shouts and different cries of the men, intelligible enough to those who uttered and those who heard them. As the herd dashed madly past, one of the she wolves caught sight of the women, and, swerving aside, the infuriated beast rushed at them. All, save Llantildis, fled shrieking into the tent. To snatch at a short sword lying on the ground, to draw it from its scabbard, and resolutely oppose the entrance of the monster into the refuge her companions had sought, was the work of an instant for the Princess. The furious brute turned upon her, and the courageous girl, waiting its onset, with set teeth, flashing eyes, and a countenance almost as fierce and terrible as that of her enemy, seized the wolf with her left hand by the crest between the ears as it rose to fly at her, and with the right hand thrust the sharp sword straight into its heart. Sigismer, who had turned his horse the moment he had heard the cry of distress, arrived on the spot just as the swift thrust of the sword laid the wolf dead at the feet of the Princess. It was a sight which he felt he should never forget, that of the beautiful girl, her long fair hair streaming behind her, her wrathful countenance thus holding the furious animal at bay. To his northern imagination it was more like the vision of some terrible legend, which despite his Catholic education still lingered in his mind, of a female deity of surpassing loveliness and supernatural power, suddenly appearing in the moment of supreme terror to protect her trembling votaries. Throwing the bridle of his horse to a panting footman, also running to the rescue, he dismounted and approached Llantildis with the feelings such thoughts would inspire. Scarcely finding words to inquire whether she were hurt, his looks expressed his admiration of her courage and self-possession. Overwrought by the sudden and unexpected call upon her powers both of body and mind, she turned pale and

would have fallen had not Sigismer caught her as she swayed forward, and taking her in his arms carried her into the tent and laid her down on the cushions.

To see her thus brought in horrified her ladies still more. They made sure she was killed, killed by the wolf, and gathered around her pale and weeping. Finding to their great joy that it was only a swoon, they made haste to use such means as should restore her. Sigismer, whom one would have expected to be more at home with men dying of sword cuts or spear thrusts on the battlefield than with fainting women, proved after all, the best physician. As soon as he saw her open her eyes, he took a cup full of wine and kneeling down beside her raised her head gently, and approached it to her lips, pressing her to drink some. Llantidis, so far recovered as to smile at his entreaties, drank as much as would satisfy him, and soon felt so much better that she sat up and insisted that the cold provisions should be served and eaten before they left the forest. She laughed at herself, fainting from fright, as she called it, and went out to look at her dead enemy whilst the attendants were busy spreading out the cold meats in the tent.

‘I will have the skin taken off and prepared till it is as soft as silk for thee,’ said the Prince. ‘I have an excellent recipe for the treatment of furs. Every claw shall be sheathed in gold, and the eyes set with carbuncles. Thou must wear it as a trophy of as cool an act of courage and self-devotion as I have witnessed for a long time.’

‘And her Highness must claim the premium for a she wolf,’ added the Antrusion Chararic, who, with the rest of the hunters, had now arrived at the tent. The daring and well timed exploit of the Princess had fired the enthusiasm of her attendants, and loud were the acclamations which received the proposal to drink ‘Waeshaël to the royal wolf slayer,’ both at the dinner in the forest and the after supper in the palace.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### *The Hawking Party.*

FOR some days after the wolf hunt the weather was so inclement that all thoughts of outdoor amusement for the Princess and her ladies had to be abandoned. This was a sore trial to Llantildis, necessarily relegated to the privacy of her apartments, where she had full time to dwell on all the interesting details of the scene in the sheepskin tent, the beaming eyes, the caressing voice, the tender solicitude of the doughty warrior, who could yet be so terrible when the occasion offered. Even the too short interviews with him, to which she was now restricted during the moments devoted to the table, were often still further shortened by his absence on some hunting expedition. Once, indeed, he had not returned at the supper hour, and Llantildis retired in high dudgeon to her apartments, after having exhausted every pretext to await his return.

In vain did the Eastern Prince linger about the palace after these his defections, hoping to catch a glimpse of the offended beauty. She was inexorable. 'What! linger in the forest to despatch the bear he had brought to bay, instead of hurrying home lest the opportunity of meeting her should be lost! No; Prince Sigismer should long for her appearance before she relented!' And she kept her word, much to the disappointment of her ladies, and still more to her own distaste. When, however, she found the merriment in the triclinium nought diminished in her absence, she changed her mood, and, being excessively dull to boot, she one evening re-entered the supper-room, all smiles and grace.

If her reappearance was most welcome to Sigismer it was not less so to the Antrusion, who felt greatly relieved to see her once more in her place under the dais. Chlovis had impressed on him, before his departure, how important he held the presence of the Princess and her ladies at the hours of repast, and the influence of noble and high-minded women on men so impressionable and full of reverence for them as the Franks. He had even led his warriors to regard the absence of Llantildis at these hours as a great disgrace, due to their unworthiness or indecorous behaviour. General contentment was therefore the order of the hour. Nor was it difficult for Sigismer to make his peace, and the Antrusion was at great pains to ingratiate himself with the Princess. He effectually regained her grace by announcing that the heron hunt should take place on the next day, should the weather continue to improve.

The announcement caused great excitement at the supper table, and Sigismer profited by the buzz of conversation that ensued to beg the Princess to accept a couple of falcons for her aviary. 'They are royal birds,' he said, 'worthy to furnish thee with noble pastime, rather than show birds for the cage; and perchance some day, by brooks and sedgy streams more familiar to me than these, thou mayest be induced to essay their powers. Would I could prove so fortunate as to induce thee thereto.'

It was the manner rather than the words which spoke to the heart of the Princess. She felt herself colouring with an emotion she did her best to repress. Her brother, his plans for her, all she knew and felt, rushed to her memory, and helped her to regain her self-possession before she was mastered by pleasant dreams. She contrived to answer her cousin's pleading smile with one as gracious, but conveying no definite answer to his last words. Turning to the Antrusion, by way of changing the conversation, she asked him if he anticipated any danger, as he had sent to search the neighbourhood of the lake. She had heard him tell the Prince he had despatched two officers into the valley.

'Not so, illustrious Princess,' he answered; 'but as thy gracious self and ladies are to be of the party, I deemed it best to know somewhat of the place. Otherwise I had not thought it worth while. As for thyself, royal Prince, thou wouldst be nothing loth were the sport to end in an adventure.'

'Nor would it be the first time such chance had happened to me,' answered Sigismer, with a grim smile, 'that a hunt has been enlivened by a fray. But when dost thou expect the report of thy messengers, noble Chararic?'

'They should have returned ere this,' the Antrusion replied. 'They must have been detained by some untoward event.'

Ethelbert and Athanaric had been the two officers the Antrusion had chosen for the inspection of the proposed hawking ground. Their duty on guard had delayed their starting on this expedition till the sun was already far on his way to the setting. They therefore chose the shortest route across the field, to the rear of the guard house, and arrived at the brink of the precipitous descent into the valley, not far from the spot where Alan Fergan had entered it on his first search for the secret passage.

'Ah! take care, comrade!' exclaimed Athanaric, as Ethelbert slipped, and would have rolled from top to bottom of the cliff, had he not grasped at a bush.

'Tis well we are on foot!' he said, rising and giving himself a shake; 'twould have been an ugly fall for a horse.'

'The Princess must come round by the Chalons road; 'tis impossible for chariots to pass this way,' observed Athanaric, as they now stood in the valley.

'Thou art right, comrade. Let us proceed in our search. 'Tis a peaceful looking place,' continued Ethelbert, 'not much of a scene for adventures of any sort.'

'No! that is certain. Yet it has not been altogether unvisited of late. Look, comrade, what thinkest thou of the pruning of these briars?' said Athanaric, pointing to some brambles that grew on one side of the path.

'That is done by the bite of a horse,' replied Ethelbert, 'and here is the print of the feet of horses near it.'

‘That! it savours more of the foot of an elephant. By the pale Hela, what be these?’

‘Follow! whatever they be, Athanaric. See! here are more, and the tracks diverge. Thou hadst best follow these. This way be mine.’

‘So be it!’ replied Athanaric, going off outside the bushes, whilst Ethelbert took the path apparently leading back up the cliff they had just descended. Here he distinctly saw the print of human feet in the soft soil, and following these with increasing surprise, and a beating of the heart for which he could not account, he found himself before a narrow opening, leading into a lofty cavern.

‘By the bright rays of Balder! it resembles the cave in the wall of Cæsar,’ he said to himself. ‘Can it be possible?’

He found himself suddenly assailed by a host of creatures, buffeting him with leathery wings for his rash intrusion into what they deemed their sole domain. Nothing disturbed by their onset, the young Frank stooped and examined the dark soil at his feet, in which beetles’ wings and remnants of insect life were glittering in the fast declining rays of the sun slanting into the cavern. Here the print of men’s feet were distinctly visible, and as Ethelbert rose from his stooping position, to see the sides and vaulted roof covered with the soft dark bodies of innumerable bats, now settled again and clinging by their hooked wings to the irregularities of the rocky surface, his eye met the opening of a dark passage revealed in that moment by a gleam of sunshine.

His heart stood still for a moment. ‘This, then,’ he thought, ‘was another entrance into the passage! Could it be that through which the Princess Ierne had been dragged away from his guard? Should he enter and explore it at once, or report it to the Antrusion first?’ He was still pondering this question in his mind when he heard himself loudly hailed by Athanaric.

He turned at once and plunged through the bushes to the left of the path he had followed. When he reached the open ground he saw Athanaric at a little distance kneeling beside some dark object. Hurrying to the spot, he found it was a man



whom at first sight he supposed was dead. Stooping down, he found him alive still, but unconscious. Neither a Gaul nor yet a Frank as could be seen by his dress, which closely resembled that worn by Budik and Gwench'lan in the forest.

'Armorican!' he exclaimed; his expedition into that country having familiarized him with all pertaining to its people. 'Then it was her uncle carried her off,' he said to himself, 'and through that outlet to the passage she passed that night.'

'Yes, here he lies, and yonder is his horse,' said Athanaric. 'Both seem to have rolled down the cliff. And what thinkest thou, comrade? The hoofs of the horse are muffled in soft leather. I marvel not the prints looked like the tracks of elephants.'

'Muffled!' repeated Ethelbert. 'Oh!' he thought, putting his hand to his head, 'that accounts for the horsemen galloping past the guard house in silence.' And he could not help groaning.

'Nay! comrade, never groan,' said Athanaric. 'The man is certainly in bad plight, but no doubt he has his deserts, being on some deed of cunning, with such precaution of horse shoeing. Hast thou thy gourd? Could he swallow some wine he might revive; perchance, say on what fool's errand he was bound.'

'Not he! even were naught amiss with him. Secrecy is the motto of an Armorican, and doubly so when bound on some errand of evil.' As he spoke he raised the head of the prostrate man, pouring a few drops of wine down his throat. He groaned once faintly, but never moved afterwards.

'He is dead!' said Athanaric; 'that was his last gasp. Let us bury him. 'Twould be but a ghastly sight to meet the eyes of our fair Princess to-morrow.'

'He must have rolled down the cliff, have stunned himself, and died of cold and hunger. Miserable wretch!' said Ethelbert, as they made ready to carry him behind the bushes at the foot of the high bank. When they came to move him they found the left side of his face horribly contused; his left arm hung by his side, and his leg seemed broken. It must have been a severe fall, they both thought, to put the man in such fearful plight. A miserable fate to perish here untended, alone, perhaps

not even missed by his comrades. They laid him down beneath an overhanging rock, a grave he was likely to occupy till the last trump sounded to awake him. 'Neither wolf nor raven can break his fast here,' said Athanaric, as he rolled a huge stone in front of this extemporized burying place.

They found it was impossible to move the horse as they had done the rider. As his neck was broken, they conjectured he had died immediately, more fortunate in this than his master. So they piled a cairn over him, working fast as night was close upon them, and they had yet the head of the valley to explore.

'Not but what to my thinking all our discoveries are made,' said Ethelbert, as he placed a stone on the summit of the now finished cairn.

'It is a pity it is not the man we have so buried,' he remarked, as this operation finished, they prepared to go on their further quest.

'Hang him, dog!' replied Athanaric, 'he has met a just fate, be sure of that. Come on, comrade! I hope the master steward has kept some substantial dish for our refecton. This unexpected work makes me marvellous hungry.'

'It may be as thou sayest, valiant comrade,' said the Antrusion to Ethelbert, as he made his report. 'Thou shalt explore this cavern to-morrow, and passage, if it be one. I approve thy reticence with thy comrade. The fewer words the better at such times. During the heron chase I will give thee a sign to depart on this quest. Provide torches, and all thou deemest needful. Didst seal Athanaric's tongue as to the dead Armorican and his horse? Aye! That is well. It is not meet such things be canvassed by every prating knave. It is for the King's council.'

The following morning, Sigismer having pointed out to the Antrusion that caution and silence were necessary adjuncts to success in their intended expedition, a more select party had been chosen to attend the Princess than on the occasion of the wolf hunt. This, though a great disappointment to those left behind, especially to the young troop under charge of the Comes, was no drawback to the Princess and her party. The

morning was fine, and the breeze, though fresh, was neither so cold or so boisterous as it had been. Sigismer had persuaded Llantildis to carry a falcon, and the well trained bird sat with a proud bearing on her delicate wrist. The Antrusion also carried one, which Sigismer had presented to him, a slight return for his hospitable entertainment. The power of the sun increased as the day advanced, and the party proceeded on its way. As they turned into the valley of the lake, even Llantildis gave a cry of delight to see such a lovely, smiling place. The water of the lake danced and sparkled in the sun; the low bushes clothing its borders, and the cliffs around, already assuming the green tint of their spring dress. No one but Ethelbert and his companion knew of the grim tenant of this lovely spot, lying beneath the cliff, exactly opposite the party as they entered, or of the dead horse under the cairn, and the eye of Chararic sought in vain for the entrance to the cavern, so completely was it concealed by the overhanging bushes.

The lake was inclosed by steep rocky cliffs that, as they receded, sloped gradually upwards until they merged into the more distant range of hills bounding the wide expanse of country known as the plains of Chalons, where the innumerable hordes of Attila had been so signally defeated. The borders of the lake were prettily overshadowed by trees, mingled here and there with an overgrowth of bushes and tangled briers. The place looked as if it had long been abandoned to the wild fowl, and still wilder animals, its sole frequenters. The profound silence which reigned throughout the valley was favourable to their success in finding a quarry for their hawks.

Sigismer, seeing this was a likely place for a heron, addressed himself at once to the necessary preparations. Calling his attendant forward with the spaniels and reserve hawks, the lines, and pouches, and other things needed for this sport, he first assured himself that the birds had received no injury on the road. Finding these in proper order, he caused the men who had them in charge to stand on one side, but near enough for any emergency. He then despatched a man, directing him to creep silently along the edges of the lake, and so to manage

his movements as to bring the heron, should he see one, between the wind and himself. These preliminaries raised the spirits of the Princess and her ladies to such a pitch of excitement, that it was only in compliance with the repeated assurances of Sigismer that the greatest silence was necessary, in order not to alarm the heron too soon, that they contrived to subdue their eagerness and wait in patience.

Ethelbert, who had as yet received no signal from the Antrusion, stood anxiously searching with his eyes the rocks and stones scattered along the margin of the lake, as well as those more immediately near the centre. Sigismer had just beckoned him to approach, as his eye caught sight of a heron, lone and solitary, perched on one leg on a stone, standing at some distance from the margin, more towards the middle of the lake. The bird seemed, as yet, quite unaware of the man creeping along the edge of the water, thickly fringed in that part with tall reeds and rushes. Slightly touching the Prince on his arm, Ethelbert drew his attention to the silent watcher of the lake. Sigismer, who for some time had been fully alive to everything, followed the direction of the young Frank's eye, and saw with a genuine satisfaction the noble prey he sought.

The heron, wholly absorbed in watching the water, seemed to wake up to the unwonted invasion of a domain hitherto so exclusively its own. With a loud and wailing cry, it raised its long neck and head, armed with its formidable beak, spread its broad wings, and stretching out its thin legs far behind it, rose into the air. Sigismer instantly unhooded his falcon, and threw it off his wrist with a shout of encouragement. Away darted the feathered hunter after the fast retreating heron. Perceiving the new danger which threatened it, the heron increased his exertions to escape, rising higher and higher in the air. Approaching the Princess, who stood entranced and delighted with the novel sight, Sigismer showed her how to unhood her bird and throw it off her wrist. Off darted this falcon also to aid in the pursuit, both hawks rising in small circles in the air, using their best endeavours and powers of wing to tower above the heron, a purpose which he on his part

strained his best efforts to defeat. All three rose higher and higher in the air, till they seemed gaining the clouds, the plaintive wail of the heron sounding fainter and fainter in the distance.

But now one of the falcons, seeming to think itself high enough for the purpose, swooped down in rapid descent on its prey. Skilfully avoiding the long spiked beak of the heron uplifted in its defence, it smote it on the wing, breaking it with the force of the stroke. The heron, thus disabled and powerless to sustain the weight of its body, came rapidly falling to the earth, closely pursued by both falcons. Touching his horse with his heels, Sigismar galloped off to the spot where he expected the heron would reach the earth, anxious to be there in time to prevent either of the hawks being spiked. He was followed by the Princess and all the party except Ethelbert, who at this moment receiving the preconcerted signal from the Antrustion, took advantage of the general excitement, and made the best of his way towards the cavern.

Casting back a look at the hawking party as he entered the bushes, he saw it was defiling through the passage at the head of the lake where ran the narrow but deep stream flowing lazily down this outlet over dark rocks and loose stones, and winding away amongst the pastures beyond. Judging that his absence would be unnoticed during their eager search for another heron, he proceeded at once on his mission. Before entering the cavern he inspected all the ground on the side where Athanaric had found the dead horse and its rider. He saw by certain marks that the main party had entered the cavern from the side on which he stood and that two or at most three had come down by the path. Here were signs of the confused scrambling of several men, and higher up the bank, traces of the muffled feet of a horse; of stones rolled down as if by violent efforts to gain an impossible footway, and farther on, just above the fatal spot, he saw where the brave horse must have given in and rolled headlong, dragging no doubt its rider with it in the fall which terminated the fearful and protracted struggle.

Entering the cavern, Ethelbert lit a torch, and turning towards the opening proceeded to investigate the passage, buffeted the while by the bats that flew screaming in circles around him, but gradually subsided as he advanced. In the passage he found footprints in greater number and confusion than in that he had searched in company with the Antrusion. He had gone for about fifty yards when he caught sight of some object lying on the ground. He stooped to pick it up, and found it was a book. As the young Frank could not read, and would not have understood it had he been able to decipher those letters, black marks only to him, he could but stand and look on the pages, a certainty stealing into his mind that it was a relic of the lost and honoured lady of his adoration. With what emotion he took out and gazed on a slip of parchment, bright with gold and azure, vermillion and green. He felt almost certain it was the work of some one of the House of Maidens, as he had seen some like this before. He knew, however, that his time must not be spent vainly asking their meaning of these mute tokens. Reverently closing the book, he placed it in the folds of his tunic, his heart beating with mournful emotion beneath it. Sighing deeply as he lighted a new torch, he proceeded in his search, thinking this melancholy discovery of the passage through which Iërne might have been carried was but a poor compensation for the misfortune of not having been able to save her. A few steps farther on he saw some other small object glimmer as the torchlight fell on it. This he also picked up and knew it at once for a piece of the silver armilla, similar to the one found on the Paris road. 'It must,' he thought, 'be a piece of the same. It would be so strange that two armillæ should be broken and found, one here and the other on the road the party who carried off Iërne that night must have taken if they were in this valley.'

Great was the surprise of the young Frank, as he advanced a step or two farther, to find himself opposite a blank wall, blocking up the end of the passage completely, and forbidding all further progress. He stood aghast for a moment; then he began to reflect on so singular a phenomenon. He examined

the ground ; the footprints were close to the wall now in front of him, and closer to one side than the other. He also found a curious mark, as of soil recently displaced. As he felt certain that the steps he had been tracing so far must have passed somewhere beyond or behind this stone wall, he began carefully to inspect it and the sides adjoining. As he touched it with his hands to feel if it offered any projection or irregularity, it yielded to his pressure and slowly turned outwards, opening, as he pressed it more strongly, into a passage. Ethelbert could not subdue a thrill of what might be partly surprise, partly a superstitious feeling, as the turning of the stone almost caused him to believe himself in the presence of some supernatural power, some invisible influence. It was only a momentary emotion, for entering the opening at once, he found himself in another gallery which he immediately recognized as the one he had entered that fatal evening. Before he proceeded to verify his conclusions by looking for the mark he had placed where the footprints had ceased in the passage, he took the precaution to note the spot where the stone turned, lest some accident should close it, and he should not be able to find it again in the side of the wall. It was well that he did, for he had scarcely left the spot when a dull noise was heard far up the passage he was now in, and a blast of wind came down it, extinguishing his torch as it passed. Ethelbert did not want for courage, and was accustomed to explain things to himself as naturally as he could, but it was not possible to repress altogether an emotion very nearly akin to downright terror at this strange incident, this supernatural, invisible agency which had plunged him into the utter darkness of a long subterranean passage. He paused to listen what would follow, prepared, in spite of his emotion, for any encounter of a mortal nature. But the noise and the cold air died away in the distance, and all was silent as before. Rekindling his torch, he found that the same blast which had extinguished it had also caused the stone in the wall to turn back into its place so effectually that had he not known the spot he would not have been able to recognize it. He touched the stone at once, and this time it revolved inwards, and that

so easily as to prove that at whatever time and by whatever people that passage had been made, no mean skill had been exerted in its contrivances.

He passed beyond the turning stone again, and re-entering the gallery found the mark in the spot where he had placed it that night. He knew now certainly it was the passage leading out on the Paris road, and it was not, therefore, necessary he should explore it again. He stood and pondered it well over, arriving at the conclusion that he had discovered all there was to discover, and that it would be best to return. Re-entering the passage by which he came, he went back to the bats' cavern. He was quite at a loss to say how long his exploration had lasted, or where the hawking party was. Taking up his snares and nets which he had provided as a plausible excuse for his absence, if it were noticed, he came out of the mouth of the cavern, carefully surveying the lake and its neighbourhood through the intervening branches.

On leaving the cavern, he was surprised to find how much progress the sun had made westward. It was still far from its setting, for its rays, though already slanting in the valley, still fell on the cliffs, the lake, the overhanging trees, flooding it all with a warm light. Whilst still busy with these observations he perceived the hawking party coming through the defile, and made haste to slip down to the margin of the lake, where he awaited his comrades approach.

'We found two more herons, Ethelbert!' shouted his younger companions as soon as they saw him. 'Why didst thou not come with us? We have had rare sport. Both were killed by the falcons, and one hawk is badly wounded by the last heron's long beak.'

As the Antrusion rode up he received a swift look, full of meaning, from Ethelbert, which told him the young man's search had been successful. He then turned and joined the party, now wending homewards, impervious to the ironical congratulations of his comrades on the result of his day's sport. Their jests were, however, very good humoured. They were all in wild spirits, the result of their successful expedition; but



the consciousness that the book and the broken armilla were safe in the folds of his tunic, rendered Ethelbert proof against all their wit.

Talking gaily and laughing merrily, the party were nearing Soissons, when the Princess suddenly checked her mules. 'Hush!' she cried. 'Listen! a trumpet! Do you not hear it, noble Prince? It is the trumpet of Chlovis!' she continued, her face growing pale with emotion, then flushing again with pride; 'the trumpet of my brother, the King. Look! see that cloud of dust to the left, the spears gleaming through it every now and then. And do you not hear the trampling of horses?'

Every one now saw the glittering spears, and heard the blast of the trumpet. Soon a body of armed men emerged from the plain to the right, at some distance ahead of the road the hawking party were following, and pursued their way into the town.

'The King! the King!' burst from the lips of the Austrustion and the Frank officers, whilst the same cries were echoed from the town, as Chlovis, at the head of his warriors, rode through the gates, flung wide to receive him.

'The King! the King! Chlovis! Chlovis! Siegbert! Ragnacair! Chilperic! Chlodomir!' rose the shouts in the town, as the chiefs of the returning expedition from Burgundy entered, triumph beaming in their eyes, victory on their brows; the long fair hair of the Merovingians floating in the breeze; the heads of the chiefs bound with the golden circlet, worn with the proud mien of conquerors. The handsome son of the handsome Childeric, Chlovis, the King, bowed with graceful courtesy right and left, to the delighted crowds, charmed with his majestic appearance, the affable though dignified glances of his dark grey eyes, the easy way in which he rode, guiding, apparently with the slightest touch, the horse which pawed and neighed beneath him, as if conscious of the royal weight he bore. The enthusiasm and excitement rose to a pitch which sent the shouts and cries back to Llantildis and the hawking party, as they stood watching the entrance of the warriors into the city.

Why Llantildis turned to look at Sigismer she could not tell ; nor yet why, on meeting his eyes, turned in that moment on hers, a cold chill seemed to strike through her breast, a sort of intuitive conviction to enter her mind, that their joyous holiday was over, and the sterner realities of life had begun again for both.

Not so with the young Franks. Wild with joy to see the great King and chief they all adored return once more amongst them, wild with the prospect of a new life of excitement opening before them under his auspices, they made their horses dance and curvet in the road, and were only restrained from setting off in a mad gallop to join their comrades by the reproving looks of the Antrustion, and the respect they owed the Princess. They therefore contrived to curb their impatience, and their entrance into Soissons was effected with a decorum and dignity befitting the rank of the illustrious Princess they were escorting, awed as they were also by the certainty of the King's displeasure, if all things were not done 'decently and in order.'

'By Odin and all the Valkyriors !' a favourite exclamation of the Antrustion when much excited and well pleased, 'but it is marvellous,' he continued, as at a late hour that night, Ethelbert, in private conference with him in the inner guard room, made his report, and gave him the trophies of his search. 'This is the very piece wanting to the broken armilla picked up on the Paris road, and not a spot on it. And this book, not that I know much about such things, but I'll wager my best sword it belonged to the Armorican maiden, because of these pictures, and this armilla to one of her thieving countrymen. The King shall be possessed of these proofs to-morrow, as well as of thy report of the double passage. The noise thou hearest might have been as thou sayest, stones falling down, either inside or outside the head of the passage by which we entered, and the sudden rush of air down so narrow a passage would be quite enough to blow out thy torch. Had it been anything living, all would not so soon have returned to silence. Thou wilt rise high, Ethelbert, if thou livest. Thou hast a

power of observation, of perseverance, of self-denial, with a courage which proves thee worthy of the confidence I have placed in thee. The King shall know of the able manner in which thou hast conducted this search, at the sacrifice also of a day's pleasure with thy companions. Sleep well, comrade! thou dost deserve the repose of a good conscience.'

Ethelbert withdrew, deprecating within himself the eulogium of his chief. He knew, if the Antrusion did not, the motives which rendered the search of that passage so dear to him, and of far greater importance than any heron chase, novel as that was. It was grief to him to part with that book, for he now fully believed it had been dropped by Iërne, perhaps even as a signal to him. Might she not, in her distress at being carried away, have thought of his succour? Might she not have seen his silent adoration, have guessed it? Would she, might she not, know how he would devote his life to track every footprint she left for his guidance? All these secret thoughts and hopes made him feel like a culprit as he listened to the commendations of his captain, and he sought his own allotted room with feelings not quite so exultant as the Antrusion thought the circumstance warranted.

## CHAPTER IX.

### *Chlovis the King.*

THE evening of the day in which Chlovis and his companions in arms returned to Soissons was devoted to high festivity, in honour of their successful expedition and the arrival of the Eastern guest whom they had greeted with shouts of 'Welcome'—shouts re-echoed at the table, when the King, passing the horn of mead to Sigismar, bid him drink 'waeshaël' to the daughter of Merovæus, the descendant of the white sea horse. Llantildis responded most gracefully to this toast—to which the Prince seemed to give a peculiar significance—rising as he drained the horn, and kissing the tips of her fingers to him, a courtesy required of her high rank and position.

When the morning came, all was order and discipline. Seated in a room devoted to the purpose, Chlovis, surrounded by his chiefs and counsellors, listened to the report of all the events which had happened during his absence. Two messengers from the Archbishop Remigius were also present, clad in frock and cowl, the usual travelling dress of the clergy in those days. By their side, and conversing with them in the Latin tongue, stood the King's intimate friend and counsellor, Aurelian the Gaul. He was clad in the costume of a Roman knight. His lorica, or coat of mail, composed of leather covered with gold scales, fitting close to his well-built figure, was fringed off at the hips with broad rounded straps, also covered with scales of the same metal. His white tunic, thickly plaited, escaping from his lorica and falling little short of the knee, as well as his white cloak, was striped with broad purple galloons, indicative of his patrician rank, as were also the small half-moons of ivory on the ankle of his half-boots of

finely prepared leather, called from this ornament 'calcei lunati.' He wore the chain of valour on his neck, and the spurs of a Roman knight on his heels, whilst a short Iberian sword, shaped like a scimitar and sharp pointed, hung close to his side, in an embroidered belt, clasped with a massive gold buckle set with jewels, as were the fibulæ fastening his cloak. On the breast of his lorica was the golden boss of a lion's head, with eyes of carbuncle flashing in the light as the wearer moved. His arms were clasped by massive armillæ, taken from a chief of the Visigoths he had slain in battle, and worn as a trophy of that exploit. On his head was a helmet of burnished gold, enriched in front with strange devices and mystic carvings of birds and fishes, and surmounted by his crest, the symbol displayed on the standard of his nation, that of an alauda, or lark, with extended wings and outstretched swelling throat, in the very act of trilling his joyous carol, his daily salutation to the resurrection of the sun from the dark grave of night. His brown hair escaped in short silky curls on his forehead, beneath which his dark grey eyes beamed with a rare intelligence, whilst a close and well trimmed moustache half concealed his eloquent lips. In his hand, on which shone the gold ring of a Roman knight, he held a book which he had received from one of the ecclesiastics, and which he appeared to be inspecting and criticizing, Aurelian being held as a man of much taste and great learning, even by the clergy of Gaul. But it was in appearance only, for both eye and ear were bent on the spot where stood Chararic beside the King delivering in his report. There were not wanting signs and sounds in that quarter, warnings of an impending outburst of royal anger.

Chararic was not a mere captain of the guard, the subordinate officer of a despotic King. Those traditions of bygone days which taught the King's word infallible, his least sign a law, had passed away for the Franks, amongst whom all were equal, and the only distinction was that of superior valour and well proved faith. He did not even hold his rank of Antrustion from the King, this highest title of nobility amongst his nation. He had received it from Childeric, the father of Chlovis, who

had conferred it on him as a reward of merit, valour, and prudence. He was the actual representative of the King in his repeated absences from the city, and commanded obedience to his behests from all the outposts and stations within the bounds of the military sway of Chlovis. It was not, therefore, dread of the King's anger which had caused his exultation when Ethelbert had presented to him the tokens he had found in the passage, but satisfaction at being possessed of these certain traces of the road her captors had followed before giving in his report of that capture to the King. He now stood beside him as an equal, yet owing him fealty and service, fearless, yet respectful, perfectly self-possessed, yet not without an appropriate deference in tone and manner to his royal leader.

Chlovis had removed his helmet, which stood beside him, the white sea horse, more like a dragon rampant, rearing a horrent crest of gold and silver above the royal coronet from which it seemed to spring. The shaggy head and crest of a wolf were so arranged as to form a visor, completely inclosing the head of its wearer, whenever he chose to lower it, and giving the King the appearance of a man with the head of a wolf—an animal, by whose name the whole race of the fierce and devastating Franks were known. The long red gold hair of the King flowed in silky curls over his shoulders, confined round his head with a gold circlet, pointed, in his case alone, with seven spikes, each spike a *fleur de lys*. His eagle glance and broad forehead imparted an air of command to his countenance, which could yet assume the expression of appalling fierceness when his dark grey eye flashed, as it then did, with suppressed wrath. A purple cloak, symbol of his royalty, embroidered with gold bees, the mystic device of his race, was worn over a tunic of rainbow stripes—known as the 'tunic of wisdom'—confined in its turn on his breast by a cuirass of gold, inlaid with silver dragons, encircling each other in the coils of deadly strife. Near him, and ready to his hand, stood his heavy francisque, and his long narrow-pointed shield, emblazoned with figures of the warriors he had slain in battle, leant against the wall. A short exclamation of wrath from his

lips arrested Aurelian's attention, and in another moment the storm of anger, lowering till now, broke out with a fierce imprecation.

'Now, by the hammer of Thor the all-powerful,' he said, 'they shall answer for this who violated the sanctuary of the House of Maidens, as well as those who had not the wit nor the courage to prevent it.'

Aurelian saw anger kindling in the glance of the Antrusion. Quick as thought he was by the side of the King.

'I pray you, show your wonted patience, my lord King!' he said, gently laying his hand on his arm. 'Insult not thy best friend, the holy Remigius, in the persons of his messengers, by the invocation of heathen deities in their presence.'

'Knowest thou aught, Aurelian,' said the King, already calmer for this timely interference, 'of such a daring defiance of our authority, of such an outrage of all that is regal and divine in womanhood, such a violation of the sacred sanctuary? Talk of insults to the holy Remigius, this is an insult to him passing all bounds of forbearance!'

'The venerable Abbess Anastasia sent for me,' answered Aurelian, 'as soon as she heard we were returned. She told me how it had happened at a time and in a manner that no human vigilance could foresee or human prudence arrest.'

'Valiant comrade!' said the King to Chararic, 'I take shame on me that I did not await the end of thy tale, knowing as I do thy tried valour and discretion.'

'Nay, lord King,' returned the Antrusion, his rising anger appeased by this magnanimous acknowledgment of hastiness, 'I can understand how thy wrath should be moved by my tale. Had we not been frustrated in our pursuit of them that night, I should have had another sort of report to make to thee, or thou wouldst not have found me alive to tell of my defeat in mortal strife. This passage was unknown to all till that evening.'

'It has long been unknown to all,' said Aurelian, 'save to those who have thus used it to effect their purposes. No wall of defence, I believe was this wall, said to be of Cæsar, from

the inroads of the Belgæ and Morini. These walls of massive uncemented stone were no doubt erected by the Keltæ, once possessors of this country, and the passage was contrived, not for warlike incursions, but for mystic and religious purposes.'

The King listened to Aurelian with a kindling smile. 'Thou seemest to cut the knot of all our difficulties,' my brave Aurelian; 'but who would the people be who use it now, if, as thou sayest, it has been so long unknown to all. There are no Keltæ now?'

'The Armoricans, my good lord!' replied Aurelian; 'they are the only remaining Keltæ in this country now.'

'By the cross thou wearest, Aurelian! but they shall feel the edge of my francisque for this; a parcel of frogs and screaming water-fowl, huddled together in their unwholesome marshes. Continue thy report, valiant Chararic; but for the loss of my captive, or rather of her ransom, I would not lose so marvellous a tale—as marvellous as some my learned skald chants to the music of his harp,' he continued, smiling as he looked at Aurelian.

'A well trained soldier!' said the King, as Chararic related the accidental discovery of the south passage, and the search Ethelbert made in it. 'His name, valiant Antrusion?'

'One whom thou callest "swift of foot," my lord King, the well-born Ethelbert. It is not the first time he has distinguished himself amongst his comrades, as thou knowest. He gave me these tokens,' he continued, producing the broken armilla and the book, and placing them in the King's hand.

'Aurelian!' said Chlovis, as he put the pieces of the broken armilla together, 'canst thou read the meaning of these strange marks as easily as thou didst the riddle of the passage?'

'Nay, my lord!' said Aurelian, taking the armilla the King handed to him. 'I know scarcely enough of this lore to read those characters, which, coupling all the information we have heard with the fact of the dead Armorican and his horse, seem to me to be Armorican also. They may be, for aught I know, ancient Keltic.'



‘By thy permission, my son,’ said one of the ecclesiastics, who had stood hitherto silent but deeply interested in all the wondrous details of Chararic’s report, ‘and with the permission of my lord the King,’ he added, speaking now the Frankish tongue, ‘if I be granted leave to examine this armilla, I might, perchance, be able to read this riddle. I knew somewhat of these toys when I was sent on a mission into Armorica, that miserable land, delivered over by the wrath of God into the hands of a man who for wickedness and evil deeds might well be the incarnation of the Evil One!’

‘By all means, reverend Father! Aurelian, give thou the armilla to the holy man,’ said the King. ‘Right lucky are we to have the aid of such learned men in our ignorance!’

A sudden flush of emotion, as quickly suppressed, appeared on the face of the young monk as he examined the armilla. ‘It is Armorican,’ he replied, with the gravity usual to him, ‘and it belongs to that man of sin, Kian or Gwench’lan, as his countrymen call him, whose impious work of rebellion and apostasy I have been called on more than once to withstand, to the best of my feeble powers. Here is his name, engraved amongst charms and invocations to fiends of darkness, whom God in His omnipotence confound!’

Aurelian and the priests crossed themselves, in devout response to this pious prayer, whilst Chlovis and the Frank chiefs gazed with wonder on the face of a man, endowed with powers supernatural to them, and speaking with the authority of a learning they could not attain.

‘Pass the book to the learned Father, valiant Chararic,’ said the King. ‘He will tell us of that also.’

‘I should think, my son,’ said the priest to Aurelian, smiling as he spoke, ‘thou couldst read that riddle thyself. The more so as it appears a book of devotion, perchance not unfamiliar to thee.’

‘By all my hopes of salvation!’ said Aurelian, opening the book in his hand, and crossing himself as he spoke, ‘this book belongs to the reverend Mother Anastasia. Here is her name inscribed on the first page, mayhap, by her own hand. And

this,' he continued, as he examined the book-marker; 'by all the saints in Heaven! here is the name of the noble Iërne on this illuminated scroll; a friendly token, given, no doubt, to thy noble captive, my lord, by the reverend Mother herself. She is no mean adept in this same art of embellishing books of devotion. The noble Iërne dropped this book in her flight—perchance on purpose to betray the way she fled. The reverend Mother is convinced her flight was most reluctant to her. She dreaded naught so much as to fall into the hands of her uncle.'

'Ja wohl! ja wohl!' shouted the impressionable Franks, clashing their shields with their swords. It was considered etiquette with them to come fully accoutred in arms to council or assembly of any sort, whence they might be despatched to immediate action, if, perchance, their arms were not turned against each other during the course of their deliberations.

'There is no doubt her uncle was of that expedition himself,' said the King. 'Would that I could execute the swift vengeance on his head his daring insolence merits! But we must use cunning to defeat cunning. We may not enter a country so impenetrable as this without knowing somewhat of its intricacies. This man would like naught better than to entangle our rash steps in his bogs and quagmires, and hold us at his mercy. We may not undertake unprepared such an expedition as this.'

'We may not well undertake any before the Field of Mars,' observed Chilperic the Merovingian, cousin to the King.

'It is better to wait and succeed, than hurry to be slain on a field of defeat,' observed Ragnacair, King of Cambray. 'What if they attribute our delay to lack of sagacity in discovering the treachery to be theirs, so they find out their mistake in a signal defeat afterwards?'

Siegbert of Cologne was for immediate action, but as all knew he argued from interested motives, his propositions were resented by the whole assembly.

'No!' said the King. 'Hold back, to leap the farther. My proposition is that we send a trusty soldier, under disguise,

to explore this country; one content to endure obscurity for a while; to render faithful obedience to orders; one who is not like to be betrayed into rashness by impulse of the moment, or fear of being taunted as Nidwith.<sup>1</sup>

'Let me go, lord King! send me!' exclaimed the chiefs.

'I warrant thee I will give thee as good an account of them as any one!' said Siegbert.

'Our work comes afterwards,' said the King. 'I esteem your valour, noble companions, no one more. It has carried our standard of the white sea horse proudly over fields where Edui and Suevi, Alani and Morini, have vainly striven to turn our guards, to overrun the countries we have undertaken to protect. The wolves of the forest and the crows of the air hail your appearance in the field; they know there will be no lack of food if they will but follow your track. The fame of the towering crest of our race is too well known, kinsman,' he continued, turning to Siegbert, 'for thee to undertake this Thing!<sup>2</sup> What sayest thou, valiant Chararic, to the young Ethelbert for this service?'

'The very man, my good lord! I thought of him even as you spoke,' answered the Antrustion.

'Is it so, valiant Princes?' asked the King. 'Shall we send this man?'

'Ja wohl!' they replied in chorus. 'Ethelbert the hawk! He is the man for moles and weasels. Make him Graf, lord King, and send him to protect the frontier.'

Chlovis smiled. 'You forget, brave chiefs, that our present undertaking requires caution and secrecy. If our envoy conduct himself with the prudence, obedience, and self-denial his mission requires, you shall determine afterwards what reward shall await his faithful execution of our plans.'

The chiefs readily assented to the words of the King. Even Siegbert was content to waive all opposition, when he found it was a man of small repute who was to be sent, not likely to attract the notice of a well-born maiden. He trusted to the chance of war in the after expedition, in which he was

<sup>1</sup> Coward.

<sup>2</sup> Important undertaking (Mallet's *North. Antiq.*).

determined to bear a part, to possess himself if he could of the fair Armorican by right of capture.

‘Knows the youth aught of the language of the country into which we send him, valiant Chararic?’ asked the King. ‘Methinks it were needful for his better success he should not be wholly ignorant of it.’

‘He does, my lord,’ interrupted the Antrusion. ‘He served in the guard on the Armorican frontier, on his first arrival amongst us. He is an apt youth, nor does he neglect the opportunity to gain information within his grasp.’

‘A laudable practice, if well directed,’ observed the monk who had first spoken to the King, no other than the pious Vedast, of Toul. ‘If the youth be apt, and my lord the King consent, this my brother Celsin is well able to give him valuable information, which will fit him the more to perform his task.’

‘It is a good offer, consecrated Father; one to be thankfully received. He shall be despatched to your teaching, at your convenience. And now, valiant companions, our work here is finished for the present. Ye will not grieve that our council is over. Thou wilt remain, my good Aurelian. I need thy counsel still, in a matter relating to the missives from the holy Archbishop. My valiant cousin will, I trust, hold me excused a little longer in my attendance on him. Chilperic, do thou the honours of the palace to my noble guest.’

When the messengers of the Archbishop Remigius were left alone with the King, the pious Vedast read to him the missive he had brought. ‘Thou seest, my son,’ he said to him, as he refolded the letter, all the advantages of this marriage. It is a much closer alliance with the King of a rich and flourishing nation than that thou didst seek with him through thine illustrious sister. The hopes and desires of her countrymen would follow the Princess Chlotildis to thy Court, and they would blend thy name with hers in their prayers for the welfare of the daughter of the murdered Chilperic, whose heavy fate and many misfortunes are still the theme of their affectionate allegiance. The children, with whom it may please God to

bless such a union, would be born princes in a direct line of succession, in a nation where your Salic laws do not prevail, and would be regarded by a loyal people as heirs to the throne of Burgundy, in right of their mother's birth. Her delicate beauty and sweet Catholic graces, her tender youth, would have the most blessed influence on yourself, your royal kinsmen, and your valiant companions in arms. Her gentleness would temper their fierceness, her dignity and modest behaviour would command their respect, and her beauty would inflame their devotion to you and the princes your successors, whom we most devoutly pray may spring from so fortunate a marriage. To yourself she would prove the greatest blessing the goodness of God can bestow on a man He has chosen and approved, the gift of a loving, faithful spouse, in every way meet to be a helper to thee, who would further thy best interests with her sweet womanly spirit, and thy counsels with her discretion and judgment, and share in all ways the burden of life with thee.'

'By the holy Martin of Tours, she would be my guardian spirit, and as such would I regard her, and devoutly listen to her sweet voice and counsel. But, holy Father,' he continued, in a voice softened with emotion, 'if this exquisite maiden be so gifted, and likely to become of such royal benefit to me and mine, will the Eduan King bestow her on me? I stand, certainly, in a better position than when I first sought the alliance of this King, but I doubt his will to purchase my services or reward my success with such a prize.'

'Thou art not far wrong, my son, in thy judgment of his nature. But the hearts of kings are in the hand of God, to bend and bow to His designs. If this design be of Him it will assuredly come to pass. Our beloved Prelate, the holy Remigius, counsels thee in this wise. Let an embassy depart with the least possible delay, whilst the flush of your success is yet glowing, to demand the Princess in marriage. It is of equal advantage to him and to thee, if his fears of thee would but let him see it—and that he may not think the matter hastily devised, thou canst safely assure him that it is not a thought  
yesterday. For months the holy Archbishop of Rheims and

the holy Avitus of Vienne have prayed that the hour of its accomplishment might not be far off. The great success of your late expedition assures the holy Remigius that the divine favour is with you, and the moment arrived in which this alliance may be fearlessly proposed. He counsels you to ransom all the booty taken in this expedition and send it all, hoof and horn; all the captives, old and young; all the plunder to the King of the Edui. A more royal marriage gift could not be made; nor can this Gundovald fail to be impressed by your munificence.'

'By the holy St. Martin! where am I to lay hands on the money to ransom so goodly a booty as that we took in that successful raid? To say nothing of the loss of my Armorican captive, whom Siegbert would have purchased at a goodly sum, only that I was loth to deliver up the noble maiden into such hands as his, there are other reasons to make me ask myself where I am to look for means to pay such a ransom. I have given up my share of the booty already to purchase the golden vessels which I intend for the use of the church of the holy Remigius. The golden helmet which I took from the head of the Almain leader whom I slew with my own hands, I destined as an offering at the tomb of that valiant soldier, the holy Martin of Tours.'

'The venerable Archbishop will release thee from thy intention towards the church he serves in consideration of the importance of the occasion. As for the helmet, thy own peculiar spoil——'

'Nay, reverend Father,' hastily said the King, 'that helmet must go where I intended. I vowed to send the best of the spoil which I took with my own hand in the battlefield to the holy Martin, if success attended my arms on this occasion. A vow is a vow, holy Father, and must be kept at whatever cost, as thou hast often told me. It is a curious helmet. Aurelian, what is the marvellous tale of which thou wert to tell me?'

'I am not certain about it, but it would seem to me that it may be the same helmet which the Emperor Valentinian lost but a century since in his expedition against the Almain Rando who had plundered Mentz, burnt the town, and retreated with

a rich booty and many captives. The Emperor was exploring a path by which to surprise the barbarian in his intrenchments, when an ambuscade of these Almaines rushed out upon him to take him prisoner. The Emperor spurred his horse down a slippery descent and escaped, but they captured his armour bearer, who carried his helmet, answering very much in description to this. I have not examined it fully, but think I am right.'

'If it be as Aurelian says, holy Father, is it not a fit offering at the tomb of that holy soldier? Thou shalt see it when the waggons arrive.'

'I knew not it was a vow, my son,' replied the monk; 'if it be as the noble Aurelian says, it can in no way be better disposed of. Most probably the holy Martin served in that same expedition, under the Emperor Valentinian.'

'Holy Father! can what thou sayest be true?' eagerly asked Chlovis, whose admiration of the character of the blessed Saint at Tours was as great as his devotion to his memory.

'Yes, my son; this same expedition was the last in which the blessed Martin served. It took place but a short time before he received leave to retire from the profession of arms and dedicate his life to his Divine Master.'

'What a fortunate event!' exclaimed Chlovis, his eyes lighting up with excitement. 'How vexed that valiant soldier must have been, to abandon to the enemy a trophy of so great value. I am well pleased that I had destined it for his tomb, where it may not fail to give satisfaction to his honour. Is it not wonderful I should have thought of it before I knew this, consecrated Father?'

'It is, my son; but to return to the matter of the ransom. The venerable Archbishop bids me tell thee, that if the sum demanded for this purpose exceed that which thou mayest well spare from thy coffers, the Church has money at her disposal which may be fitly applied to a purpose affecting her own ultimate interests.'

'Perchance I may be able to muster the means,' said Chlovis, after a pause, 'without the aid of the Holy Church,

whose coffers it were more seemly to fill than to empty. I may not in wisdom drain my own, even to purchase to myself such a lovely and exalted Princess for my bride. There are the moneys from my farms; their produce increases yearly; but in the disposal of those moneys, the expenses of the palace and the charge of its officers have to be considered. And then,' he added, smiling, 'if I am so fortunate as to obtain the hand of this lovely maiden, I must leave myself somewhat for the "morning gift." If I had but received the ransom for Juba and his monkeys and the other captives for which I am in treaty with the Visigoth! There is not much faith to be put in the promises of that paltry boy. His father Euric, of valiant memory, would have redeemed his word long ago! I shall have to teach him better some day.'

'My good lord!' interrupted Aurelian, his face brightening as with a happy inspiration, 'why shouldst thou not purchase, at least, some of the booty with grants of lands? There are many of your own immediate followers would be glad to receive shares of land now desolate, which under cultivation would become fertile. With the security of possession assured to them by your grant and protection, they would no longer grudge the labour they might hesitate to bestow on lands they had seized by force and must keep by the sword. The possession of these grants need not take them from their profession of arms, as their slaves and captives could till the land for them, as yours do—and what has answered better than your farms? Their success is an object of envy and admiration to many of your warriors. The sight of your well filled granaries, your well stocked pastures, excites their emulation. The smiling homesteads, the fruitful orchards, the well tilled gardens with their humming hives, are objects of legitimate desire to them.'

'Well said, my brave Aurelian! that is a right good thought,' answered Chlovis, with delight. 'We must see what can be done in this, and so propose it in the Mallum, and let the free companions have their say about it. It is well Siegbert and Ragnacair are here; they must do something at this push



for me. I have helped them in worse straits. Not but what Siegbert owes me a grudge ever since I refused to sell him my beautiful captive. He may not feel very well inclined to help me.'

'Has he not pretty well forgotten her by this time, my good lord?' said Aurelian.

'Ah!' said Chlovis, with a doubtful accent, 'I do not know so much about that same forgetting, where his own gratification is in question. If ever I recover her, I must take care she does not come within his reach, lest he help himself to her.'

'Under thy good leave, my noble son,' said the priest, 'it would be for the best that myself and my brother Celsin return to Rheims, to report to our venerable Archbishop the measures thou art about to take, in order to follow his advice. He might be able to give thee much help in this matter, and would, if thou so wished it, authorize our return—there may be parchments and plans to draw up.'

'Thou counselest well, holy Father. Be it as thou sayest.'

As the ecclesiastics retired from the council-room, the King said to Aurelian, 'Bear with me a little longer. I would speak to thee of somewhat on my mind. I charge thee not to overrule it with thy sage counsel, as thou dost so often to my most notable desires. It will be much pain to me if thou seest fit to dispute the expediency of this.'

'Nay, my good lord!' answered Aurelian, smiling, 'thou must not prejudice in thy favour the sage counsellor, whose best advice thou wouldst have. Nor can it be inimical to thy scheme, unless it be one that militates against thine own interest; a more likely thing than to be one not fraught with honour and truth.'

'Know thou, Aurelian, I have received secret overtures from the friends of the royal Chlotildis, who would have me rescue her from her uncle's grasp, and revenge her murdered father. Nay, start not! I desire not to meet their wishes in any way. Will this Eduan King receive my embassy in amity?

No, by St. Martin ! Rather would he deprive her of life than see her under my protection.'

'Thou art not far wrong, my good lord. But I trust much in the influence of the venerable Avitus. Gundovald esteems his advice much. He may persuade him this alliance is his best safeguard from his own people.'

'It may be as thou sayest. Yet I can but fear my chance with him is small. Could I but find access to this lovely maiden, and establish an interest in her heart, it might be much to my purpose. Now, I may not go myself.'

'Heaven forbid, my lord, you should risk a life so valuable to the weal of all. It may not be thought of.'

'I do not mean to put my life at the mercy of that Eduan traitor, trust me, Aurelian ! Who is to say with what conditions he might bind me, if he had me once in his power ? Let him but keep faith with me, and I will keep faith with him. Nor do I mean to link my fortunes with the traitors in his Court ; I will not be the tool to carve out their designs.'

'Well resolved, my good lord ! Thy present aim is to establish such an interest in the heart of the Princess as will induce her to defeat the project of her uncle. It is probable he will hasten the hour of her profession the moment thy embassy demands her hand. Were she prepossessed in thy favour, were her eyes once opened to the true nature of her uncle, her resentment at his plans were thy best hope. The man who can establish this vantage-ground for thee, must have wit enough to keep clear of all other interests ; above all, to keep the conspirators in the dark as to thy designs.'

'Thou hast it, Aurelian. Knowest thou a man fitted in all points for such a deed ?' and the King bent a look of affectionate inquiry on his friend.

'Yes, my good lord ! - I will go, if thou wilt accept my poor services in this matter, under the sanction of the holy Archbishop.'

'Aye, Aurelian !' said the King, placing his large, but fair hand on his friend's shoulder ; 'it was of thee alone I thought

for such a mission. Thou must promise me one thing. Thou must not woo the beauteous maiden for thyself.'

'Nay! Now you are merry, my lord, knowing, as thou well dost, there is but one lady to whom I have devoted my life.'

'But why seek the sanction of the good Remigius, since thou dost not find fault with my scheme? It is almost too much of a love conceit to find favour in his eyes.'

'I think not,' returned Aurelian. 'Rather will he approve a scheme likely to prove a masterstroke of policy if it be effected with discretion. I may not go without his sanction. This alliance is too near his heart. Should some untoward event arise to mar our plans carried out without his knowledge, it would prove a great misfortune. With his sanction, I should go armed with a confidence that would infallibly insure success.'

'It is not so entirely his own scheme, my good Aurelian! seeing it was proposed to me also by the friends of the beauteous maiden.'

'And but for the holy Remigius there would have been no beauteous maiden to propose as thy wife. Those friends of hers never thought of it till thy late success raised their hopes in thy power—hopes thou dost not seem much inclined to further!'

'No, by St. Martin! Let them fight it out themselves. But when canst thou seek the sanction of the Archbishop? Thou canst not leave before the Mallum, nor canst thou be absent from the Field of Mars, or the banquet afterwards. Why, man! there will be over four thousand excitable fellows to manage and keep in order. Thou wilt have to exert thy utmost skill in song to enthral their senses with thy stirring lays. And I have promised my kinsman Sigismer thou shouldst sing the prowess of Merovæus, the man from the sea. He is his ancestor, as well as mine, and the Prince will be entranced with thy tale of the siege of Orleans or the battle of Chalons.'

'I shall not be absent from either, my good lord, nor yet delay my mission to Rheims. I shall start at once—

taking but the time to change my apparel. I may not go armed into the presence of the Archbishop.'

'Take thy sword, at least, Aurelian! No man so good but has enemies.'

'I shall wear a proper coat of mail,' answered Aurelian, smiling, 'even the pilgrim's garb I shall don for my journey to Geneva. Thou wilt see how it becomes me. There is no telling what honour it may procure me in those far off regions. It has carried me through worse dangers than I am likely to encounter either between this and Rheims or this and Geneva, for that matter.'

'Thou seemest to fear no danger, Aurelian,' said the King, grasping the hand of his friend. 'But go, as thou hast said. Tarry not at Rheims longer than needful. Fain would I know thy answer.'

The swift footed jennet which Aurelian had purchased in his last embassy to Aquitania, soon carried him to Rheims. Kneeling before the Archbishop for his blessing, he made known his errand.

'My son, what can have put such a thought into his head? It is not a bad one. Had this mission been intrusted to any but thee, I should have been loth to sanction it. Go, my son! It is not an improbable conjecture of that sagacious Sicambrian, our dear son, that this Eduan, if brought to bay, might dare such deeds as it were good not to think of. Seek thou the holy Avitus ere thou seest the Princess. He will advise thee in what manner thou canst best approach her. Return to me, my son, ere thou depart on thy errand—I would fain arm thee myself for this enterprize with the armour our Holy Church provides for her children, even with the graces and strength imparted by the blessed Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist.'

## CHAPTER X.

### *The Field of Council.*

GREAT were the preparations for the now fast approaching Mallum. The streets of Soissons re-echoed to the ringing hammers on the anvils in the forges, where helmet and shield, sword and spear, were furbished anew, whilst many a Gaulish artist plied his needle or taxed his inventive brain in the fashioning of cloak and tunic. All were desirous of making as goodly an appearance before the Eastern Prince as time would allow. Even Chlovis himself had hinted to his chiefs that it would be as well to make some extra exertion for that occasion.

The Princess Llantildis had also roused herself, thinking that it became her station as the King's sister to superintend in person the selection of the apparel best suited to adorn her royal brother. She was busied in this important occupation when a page entered, bearing the King's mystic tunic, and a message from Chlovis begging her to repair its beauty and virtues, as he must wear it at the Mallum. Llantildis received this message with much gratification. It was a recognition of her pre-eminent rank and influence. None but a Princess of the royal race, nearest and dearest to the King, could undertake such a task. It was one involving no small care and labour, and Llantildis resolved that no pains should be spared to carry out the repairs successfully. Wool had to be carded and spun, dyed, and even woven if a new piece were required. All these operations had to be performed to appropriate incantations, for, though the Princess professed to be a Christian, she expressed no reluctance to practise the heathen rites now required of her.

Like many of the barbarians of that time, she had accepted tenets she hardly understood, chiefly because her sister Albofleda had done the same on her marriage with the great Theodoric of Ravenna. She was therefore soon busily occupied with her preparations. The tunic having been worn at all the councils and Mallums held since the day when its owner had been proclaimed King, certainly did require some small renovation.

Preparations were also going on at the spot where the Mallum was usually held, under a large oak, whose enormous girth of trunk and branches proclaimed its antiquity, situated not far from the south gate of the city. Under this huge oak was a stone, on which the King sat in council, his armed chiefs and followers standing around him. It had been mooted that it would be better to choose another situation, the field being so irregular as to be deemed most inconvenient for so large an assembly as that now expected to meet. The Gauls opposed this suggestion manfully, asserting that no meeting would be of any avail held in any other spot than this, sacred from time immemorial to the most solemn acts of legislature, debate, or judicial decision, which owed, as they said, the wisdom displayed at these meetings entirely to virtues inherent in the tree and stone. The Franks, already prepared by the traditions of their nation to receive such assertions willingly, opposed the removal of the stone from beneath its venerable canopy, urging that the ground should be levelled, so that the warriors might stand in a circle, of which the stone should be the central point. This proposition being hailed by general assent, labourers were instantly set to work to carry it into effect. The Gauls provided slaves in such numbers that the field of Council soon exhibited a scene of busy animation. Soon a growing excitement began to manifest itself, and as the noise of tongues increased the labour of hands and arms flagged. By degrees it altogether ceased. The general discussion becoming warmer as time passed on, ended in an immediate message to Aurelian, that ever needful counsellor and chief director of the present work.

On his arrival he went up to the famed oak, as suggested to him, and saw at a glance the cause of all the excitement. The work had so far progressed as to give to light, with but slight interruptions, the outline of a circle embracing the oak at a point in its circumference, with here and there traces of three tiers or steps one above the other in the circle itself. Aurelian directed the labourers to follow these lines carefully. This led to the complete disinterment of a moderately sized amphitheatre cut in the earth of the field, 'a relic, no doubt,' he said to the King, 'of the same people who had made the passage in the wall of Cæsar—a mighty people now passed away, but who once held high judicial and religious sway in this neighbourhood.' The King expressed his satisfaction at this opportune discovery, pleased that any outward circumstance of time or place should lend a prestige to any of his undertakings. The Gauls cut the greenest sods they could find at that season of the year, and turfed the seats all round so successfully that the result of their labour was a commodious amphitheatre, complete in all its details. The apt coincidence of this discovery was considered of good augury by all concerned.

The evening before the Mallum had arrived, and found Chlovis closeted in his council room with Aurelian and the priests Vedast and Celsin, putting the last finishing touches to the plans and propositions for the morrow's meeting. Their labours were drawing to a close when the Antrustion craved admittance for himself and the young warrior Ethelbert, whom the King had desired to see ere he went off guard that night. As Chararic had merely desired Ethelbert to come with him, the young Frank was somewhat startled to find himself ushered, unprepared, into the presence of the King and his intimate counsellors. It was not the rank, but the prowess and valour of the King and his friend Aurelian, the wisdom and learning of the priests, which inspired him with feelings of veneration nearly akin to awe. Even then, as every free companion knew, he felt that, were he spared to survive the vicissitudes of a warrior's life, he might rise even to the rank of King, elective in those days. But to Aurelian and the priests he felt a deep

inferiority. He had not been able to read and write as they did, or solve the enigma of the book and the armilla. Still, he maintained his self-possession, though not without an expression of youthful modesty most becoming to him in the eyes of the King.

Chlovis, standing at the upper end of the room, turned a scrutinizing glance on the face of the young man, who bore it with unflinching equanimity. 'I need thy services, noble Ethelbert,' said the King to him, well pleased with his manly bearing. 'I want a man with the qualities of a trustworthy and obedient soldier, who will forget himself and his own interests for those of the enterprize confided to him. I intend sending thee into Armorica, to make inquiries in that country as to its state and capabilities, as well as to ascertain where are the head-quarters of the traitor who carried off my Armorican captive.'

At this sudden and unexpected allusion to things touching the most sacred feelings of his heart, Ethelbert felt himself grow pale and red by turns. Chlovis remarked his emotion, but, for the moment, he mistook its cause.

'Nay, comrade,' he said, in reassuring tones, 'I call not thy vigilance in question nor the fealty of thy watch, satisfied by the report of thy valiant chief that thou didst perform thy best duty then and since. For proof of this I have sent for thee as the man I judge best fitted for a mission of much trust and some danger.'

Ethelbert recovered his self-control when he found the King ascribed his perturbation to dread of his anger, not to its secret cause. He assured the King, in a low but distinct voice, that his sword and best services were his alone. As the King then proceeded to tell Ethelbert what he required of him, the face of the young man beamed with animation. It was the very service after which he yearned—to follow that beloved track, to devote every faculty he possessed to the rescue of Iërne, knowing, as did all now, how much against her will she had been carried off. This time the King seemed instinctively to divine the cause. of the young Frank's exaltation, and



inwardly rejoiced at a discovery likely to forward the success of the plans he now proposed.

‘It is well, comrade,’ he said; ‘right glad am I to know there is a motive in thy heart likely to be the best spur to thy exertions. I mean thy anxiety to perform thy task to thy best ability,’ he added slowly, and with fixed meaning, giving Ethelbert—rather startled that his leader should have divined his secret so soon—to understand, not only that he condoned the rashness of his high-placed ambition, but that he even approved of it as an incentive to ardent service. ‘But thou must bridle thine impatience to depart on thy mission,’ he resumed, ‘even though I here confer on thee the privilege to hold thyself sole knight and protector of my beautiful captive. Thou art willing to accept her as the sovereign mistress of thy sword and heart?’

‘With my most devoted gratitude, lord King. My best heart’s blood is at her—at thy service,’ he hastily added, correcting himself. ‘I deem myself most unworthy of so exalted a fealty.’

‘Nay, by my faith, thou provest thyself every way worthy of it. Come hither, I pray thee,’ continued the King, unbuckling the sword by his side; ‘it is not such as thou who will ever dishonour a weapon which has stood thy King in good stead in many a fray. Nor was it tempered by common smith, nor were the strokes of the hammer that forged it unaccompanied by mystic rune and saga of high-born skald. May it carve thy way to the high station which is the meed of all brave men! That it should win thee further favour where thou mayest most desire it,’ he added, smiling, ‘is an assurance that must come from lips more guiltless of hair than mine. But thou knowest that the hearts of fairest maidens always incline to the bravest warrior.’

As he spoke the King buckled the sword and belt, to which it hung, round the waist of the young Frank. This operation finished, Ethelbert went down on one knee, and, drawing the sword from its scabbard, kissed the blade with fervour, pronouncing an oath, by the edge of his sword and the shoulder of

his horse, of eternal fealty to the King and devotion to the cause he now undertook.

'As I find thou knowest somewhat of the tongue of these marauding thieves amongst whom I now send thee, I will intrust thee with a verbal message for my fair captive. Perchance thou mayest meet her in thy wanderings.'

The hot blood again rushed to the young man's face. He could not command his voice in answer to this blest suggestion, but the grateful passionate look he gave the King assured him that he was understood.

'Thy reward is before thee,' continued the King, 'thou hast chosen it for thyself. I hear that thou hast not yet engraved thy shield with thy deeds of prowess. What thinkest thou of a white ermine on a blue field of hope? Take it for thy device henceforth, and for thy crest a hooded falcon, and for watchword I give thee this—"*Faithful, I obey!*" Ah, my valiant kinsman!' he said abruptly, 'as the Eastern Prince entered the room, 'I am well pleased my messenger found thee. I feared thou mightest already have retired to thy slumbers. Come, as thou seemest to be still wandering in search of thy Polar star, I will be thy guide till it shine on thee again. I am bound for the room where my sweet sister is preparing my bravery for the morrow.'

Linking his arm within that of Sigismer, he spoke a few parting words to Aurelian and the ecclesiastics, leaving Chararic and Ethelbert with them to arrange about the journey of the latter to Rheims.

'Thou wilt be present at the Mallum to-morrow?' he asked his cousin, as they proceeded down the peristyle. 'I should be glad of thy presence, and, may be, of thy suggestions; if our debate seemed of any interest to thee. It is difficult to judge of the right or policy of a course of action at the moment of decision, whereas it oftentimes appears mere blindness, after the thing is done, not to have seen its weakness at once.'

'I do not think, my royal cousin,' returned Sigismer, 'that there is any one taking part in to-morrow's Mallum endowed with clearer foresight, calmer judgment, or more deliberate

counsel than thyself. I am a mere captain of the Imperial guard; my arm is strong, my heart is full of the courage and fire of youth. I am more fit to head a charge against the enemy in the battlefield than to sit in council in the meeting of the wise.'

'Meeting of the wise! Granted, if thou speakest of such men as my sage Aurelian and the learned Fathers. As to the rest, I doubt if thou findest enough wisdom in all the Mallum to-morrow to weigh down a maiden's little finger. They generally give me so much my own way, when it does not clash with their own personal interests, that it can be scarcely wholesome for me.'

'The truth is, thy way is always well considered beforehand, and is so much for the general welfare, that I should marvel if any of thy free companions could dissent from thy decisions. Their discipline, union, and devotion to thee, surprised me at first, but not now that I know more of thee, more from their report than even from thy own actions.'

'Of my own immediate followers, valiant Sigismer, speak thus; of the others—well, I can hardly expect they should see with my eyes, or forget their own immediate interests for what they think mine. Whereas, if they only had the wit to see it, they would know that I have no interests at heart but what tend chiefly to those of the whole community. But I must try and forget these things for awhile; wouldst thou like to see how our maidens are employed on the eve of a day so important to the vital welfare of all in my charge? I think your Eastern dames can hardly bear comparison with them in this point. See,' he said, as he opened a door, and disclosed the bright and animated scene where the industrious Princess and her attendants were busily employed, some carding wool, some spinning, some putting it up in skeins, whilst the needle of Llantildis went busily to and fro through the mystic tunic, keeping time to the strange weird chant that flowed from her lips, a chant accompanied by the notes of a small harp deftly played by a young lad about twelve standing near her; his fair hair and skin, his blue eyes, testifying mistakeably to his northern origin.

‘Now we must have the runes of Balder, the bright Æsir, the beautiful son of Odin, the dispenser of light and wisdom,’ said Llantildis, as her chant came to a close.

‘Balder the Fair, hath built him a bower,  
In the land where I know the least loathliness lieth,<sup>1</sup>

—thou knowest from the Voluspa, after that we must have the saga of Frigga his mother, and of Freja the lovely one, whose dominion is over the sweet spring and over the hearts of men.’

The words, the chords now struck upon the harp, were familiar to Sigismer, and made his heart beat, Catholic as he was. Often had he listened to this same saga or rune, when yet a child at his mother’s knee, in scenes like these. It came home to him with the same feeling as would the remembrance of a far off dream of the dim distant days of the long past. He saw her yet, his mother, the beautiful Ostrogoth Princess, just so employed, just so seated, in the midst of her maidens, whilst he played and romped amongst them, entangling the bright wools, stealing the scissors, slyly cutting off scraps of woollen stuffs, even locks of shining hair clustering in tempting ringlets, crimes for which he was snatched up and punished with showers of kisses, an indignity he resented with resolute kicks, and manful struggles to escape.

Llantildis was so absorbed in her occupation that she had not seen the door open, or perceived the King and his Eastern guest contemplating the scene before them. As she became aware of it she raised her head, so gracefully bent, thought Sigismer, over her work, her shining tresses covering her shoulders as with a mantle. She blushed as her eyes met those of her cousin, bent on her with a look of tender devotion and admiration. She shook her hand in playful menace at her brother, for his intrusion into regions so exclusively devoted to her, interrupting a work which he must know was of so much importance, with so little time in which to complete it, and very likely all the runes to chant over again for this break in them.

<sup>1</sup> Mallet, *North. Antiq.*

‘What serious counsel dost thou then meditate to-morrow, my best brother,’ she continued, ‘that thou hast sent me this enchanted tunic to refresh and renew? What grave intention has made thee so anxious to clasp wisdom to thy breast in its folds? See where the Catholic Leona is preparing unwittingly, in the most mystic fashion, the cleansing liquid which will so beautify it that, in to-morrow’s sun, it will glow with the freshness it wore when it first came out of the loom!’ And the Princess laughed gaily, as she thought of the trick she had played her favourite Leona, and the expostulation she anticipated when the dignified Roman matron found her out.

‘Fairest sister,’ replied Chlovis, ‘never hast thou done me such good service as now. I might easily have worn this garment as it was. It was a kind of superstitious feeling which made me send it to thee, beautiful daughter of my beautiful mother Basina. It will bring good fortune to me to wear it in to-morrow’s council, repaired by thy loving care, renewed in virtue by thy sweet influence and goodwill. I have need of thy best wishes to-morrow, dearest and fairest as ever, and of thy affection, come what may between us.’

‘What dost thou mean?’ she asked with unfeigned surprise. ‘Thou speakest in riddles now, most assuredly.’

‘Thou hast not made up thy mind, hast thou, fairest sister, to remain handmaid to Gefjon<sup>2</sup> all thy life? There is many a renowned warrior would gladly sue for thy hand if I gave him permission. It is a prize,’ he added, seeing a look of lofty scorn on the beautiful face of the Princess, ‘well worthy the rivalry of the best and foremost amongst them, and not to be easily attained. Still, the right man is sure to come at last, and thou wilt learn to think less of thy brother when another draws all thy interest to himself. Thou wilt have no time then to weave tunics for me, sweet sister, and so, at last, my wisdom will go from me, for who will weave for me then the web of the beautiful mother and her beautiful daughter?’

<sup>2</sup> Mallet, *North. Antig.* Gefjon was the goddess of innocence, and her votaries remained always unmarried.

The tone of mournful raillery accompanying this speech provoked a reluctant smile on the face of the Princess. She felt vexed to be so bantered before her cousin, conscious as she was that a good half of the garrison in her heart had turned traitor and gone over to him. But she put as good a face on the matter as she could.

‘It is a pity,’ she said, ‘thy tunic is not finished, so that thou mightest put it on at once. It seems to me it is more than needful to thee at the present time, or thou wouldst never have come here at this time of night to hinder my labours, and so, perchance, deprive thyself of its influence, on which, by thine own account, is thy chief reliance for wisdom in to-morrow’s Mallum. It is time for us all to look out for the “right man” if thou beginnest to fail us. A pretty council it will be if any important measure is coming on, and thy usual wit is wanting to meet it. Go! go! do not come here fooling me with meaningless speeches.’

‘Now, sweetest, fairest, and best beloved sister, do not be displeased with my trifling a little with thee. I have so many serious hours forced upon me, so many anxieties, that it is but natural I should wish sometimes to sun myself in thy smiles. But, if it is disagreeable to thee, I will leave thee to thy task. Come, Sigismer; we are not wanted here. Come to my chamber. We will have a horn of spiced wine before we seek our slumbers. Since maidens will not smile on us, we will seek the smiles dancing in the brimming cup. Good night, sweetest sister! Sleep well, and dream of a little pardon to thy poor brother.’

Llantildis would have spoken the words that would have retained the departing visitors near her, but her pride kept her silent, and she perceived that Chlovis was more than half laughing at her still. Her heart swelled with vexation as the door closed behind her brother and cousin. She resumed her work, but the spirit which animated her before the advent of Chlovis was gone. The wool broke, the needle had ever to be replenished, the scissors were nowhere to be found, the harp and the voice were never together the rest of the evening, the

runes halted, the sagas were a failure. It was a most lame conclusion to a most prosperous beginning, and right glad were her ladies and slaves when the tiresome tunic was finished, packed, and carried off by two pages in a basket of open work, waiting to receive it.

The room to which Chlovis now led his princely cousin, though not so luxurious or costly in its arrangements and accessories as that of Llantildis, was by no means rude and ungarnished. Skins of endless variety were piled up, to form seats and couches for those admitted to its privacy. Bright armour was disposed against the walls, burnished helmets and shining cuirasses, trophies of war or of his various forays. On a table, near the bright fire burning on the hearth, most welcome in the cold night of March, stood the flagon containing the spiced wine for the King's 'night-cap.' The flagon was of chased silver, but the horn was the horn of a urus, mounted in silver, with a large yellow topaz set in the lid, somewhat resembling the cairngorms, or 'stones of the holy circle,' sacred to the Druids. It was an article of faith with Chlovis, that this drinking horn was part of the spoil taken out of the tent of Attila by his ancestor Merovæus, at the time of the memorable rout of the terrible Hun on the field of Chalons.

The attendants awaiting the appearance of the King, drew forward seats for the new comers, disposing the furry skins on them into soft yielding cushions. Chlovis, filling the capacious horn with the spiced drink, said, 'Waeshaël, valiant kinsman ! I drink to thee ! Come pledge me !' he continued, as he finished his draught. 'Thou hast as much right to drink deep from this horn as I have. My valiant ancestor was also thine.'

Sigismer did not want a second bidding, the attendants unarming Chlovis, as his Eastern guest pledged him with a 'waeshaël' as cordial as his own. Chlovis recommended Sigismer also to unarm, ordering a page to fetch a large fur cloak, like one his own attendant now placed on his shoulders.

'I am not ill pleased Aurelian is not here,' said the King to Sigismer, as soon as the attendants had withdrawn. I sought the opportunity of speech with thee, though I must pray thy

forbearance if I say aught that startles thee. I may not do what I would, partly by my own fault, partly that circumstances thrall me. Could I have foreseen events, my course might have been different. Learn first that I am about to seek a second wife, this time with a view to strengthen my position. Knowing this thou mayest, perchance, find more interest in the Mallum to-morrow.'

'Speakest thou of this to-morrow?' asked Sigismer.

'Not exactly, for as yet the King of Burgundy does not even dream of such a project. I must tell thee, it is the hand of his fair niece I seek.'

'And Llantildis, the Princess; does she know?' asked Sigismer.

'No; it is that of which I would speak. My experience of my poor Llantildis teaches me that this marriage will be a bitter grief to her. Poor sister! 'Tis a bitter trial to a woman to have to abdicate for a stranger her throne in her brother's heart, her rule in his house.'

'Only that a maiden can always follow her brother's example,' said Sigismer. 'Thy sister cannot lack for worthy suitors, dowered with her beauty and grace, with thy influence and power. Is she not sister to a leader who will one day rule a kingdom equal to, if not greater than the kingdom of thy brother, the great Theodoric?'

'Tell me, Sigismer,' said the King, 'thou didst hear of her beauty from report. I know there is much intercourse between Ravenna and Constantinople, and thou comest thus far with thy hawks and thy hounds to judge if report were a true gossip? Thou mightest have had a worse purpose for thy journey hither, valiant cousin.'

'I confess it was something like it,' answered Sigismer, laughing. 'Partly also, that report spoke loudly of thee, thy prowess, thy policy. I wished to see with mine own eyes whether thou wert the great ruler report spoke thee. I find it was rather within than beyond the mark in thy praise.'

'Now, comrade, I did not bring thee here to praise the brother, but to learn of thee if thou art satisfied with the sister.'



Nay; listen to me quietly,' he said, laying a restraining hand on the arm of Sigismer, who had started at this point-blank assertion. 'I am in earnest when I seek thy best counsel in this affair. I will be frank with thee. I have had time in the midst of my numerous occupations since my return, to observe both thyself and my sister. I will tell thee at once, that it is with a most cordial pleasure I have remarked such a good understanding between you.'

'Thou didst not think me presumptuous to look so high? But I also will be frank with thee. I confess I did come so far to see this peerless maiden, and could I perceive that I was not displeasing to her or to thee, I meant boldly to have asked her of thee for my wife. Thou knowest I have a right to speak thus frankly. I have not thy wisdom, thy kingly rule and power; but my position at the Court of the Byzantine is not unbecoming a Princess, even of the race of Merovæus. My kinship to you both makes my suit less presumptuous than it may appear at first sight.'

'Thou art a right good fellow, Sigismer, to speak so boldly and fearlessly,' said the King. 'Thou approvest thy claim to that same descent by thy dauntless spirit. Llantildis must be married; two queens cannot rule peaceably in this Court. The Princess I seek in marriage will be accompanied, not only by friends of power and influence, but by the vows and hopes of a strong party in her own country. Poor Llantildis! it will be an unequal struggle for her, not even backed by her own brother. It does seem a craven-hearted thing, to betray the poor girl to this. Now I would sooner bestow her on thee than I would on any other man. Now, do wait, Sigismer, till I tell thee all, for now comes my dilemma. In giving her to any but thee, I fear she would regret something more than her present position; nor would she find a compensation, either in Sigismund, the puny son of the Burgundian King, or in the sensual Siegbert of Cologne, cousin though he be to us, for the 'Tiger Prince,' whose apparition in these parts will, I fear, haunt her dreams for evermore. Thou seest she has told me much more than enough to show me thou hast made quick progress in her good graces.'

‘Thou canst not have promised her to——’

‘Two husbands, and thou the third! Not exactly, my valiant comrade. I certainly sought the Burgundian alliance for her, and only that the old fox, Gundovald, loves me not enough to say “yes,” and fears me too much to say “no,” she had already, perchance, been the bride of the Burgundian, or of Siegbert.’

‘Now, bless all the stars that shone upon my birth! I owe them that good fortune that she is still free.’

‘It is well Aurelian does not hear thee, Sigismer. Thou art more than half a heathen, for all thy Christian teaching. There is another project of alliance with the Burgundian, as I have told thee, so that is one candidate disposed of. Now for Siegbert of Cologne. I do not quite see my way at present with him. Thou needest not take alarm. I do not mean to give my sister to such a barbarian. I half promised to consider his claim favourably, if the Burgundian alliance did not come off. But marry Llantildis he shall not! He is not much better than a wild animal, devoid of all reason, honour, or principle, so that it becomes a matter of much difficulty to keep friends with him. Perhaps some lucky stroke of an Almain or Visigoth francisque may simplify my entanglement with him. I did not forbid his suit, and after all he is my kinsman, so I may not affront him openly, and owe him some little respect in the choice of the means I employ to deny him. Marry Llantildis he shall not; it would be double cruelty to her now. Do not betray me to her, comrade, if I tell thee what I saw her do to-day, when she little thought I was looking at her. That falcon thou gavest her, she would not have it put in the aviary, nor would she tell me where it was. I will tell thee,’ added the King, laughing. ‘What thinkest thou of him for a maiden’s companion in her sleeping-chamber? A dainty pet, is he not? Now, I am not disparaging thy bird, comrade; thou needest not be so anxious to sing his praises. I only say he is a dainty companion for a maiden, this same bird of rapine! I know not by what chance the tapestry of her door was drawn; but in passing from the council room I looked in, and saw her stroking

and kissing and fondling it, as it had been the softest, silkiest creature ever pressed by maiden's lips! I feared Aurelian, who was with me, might notice it, so I hurried on. Thou wished thou wert thy lucky falcon? I well believe it. What sayest thou to such a revelation? I hear she calls him "Tiger." That is a somewhat strange name for a falcon.'

'If it were not for thy pleasant news, my royal cousin, I should owe thee somewhat for thy banter, though I verily believe it is from thy joy of heart it flows. At least, I would fain believe it.'

'Thou mayest, comrade; it is so, in all faith! My heart is right merry within me, to see such a fortunate end to my anxiety on her account. With the prospect of such a future for her as the shelter of thy heart, I can wait events with better patience, and the hour when I can give her to thee.'

'Will that hour be far removed? Why must it be so? Why not give her to me at once? Siegbert will soon get over it. I hear he was in love with thy captive.'

'Thou must learn to wait the brewing of the mead, ere thou canst drink it, thirsty as thou mayest be. So soon as I can break with Siegbert, claim thou the promise I here plight thee. My sister Llantildis is thine for wife. Give me thy hand on it; it is an oath. I swear to thee by the edge of my sword! I am by no means tired of thy companionship; it has done me good to see thee, and I have much to show thee yet. Stay with me, valiant Sigismer, to thy will's content; but promise me one thing. Seek no quarrel with Siegbert; thou wouldst only complicate my difficulties. He will give me occasion to break with him before long. I promise thee not to let it pass unnoticed. Another promise I ask of thee. Let not my sister perceive by thy manner that aught has passed between us to-night, or draw, by thy attendance on her, the jealous Siegbert to suspect my disposition in thy favour. It might breed a quarrel more inimical to thy interests than thou canst be well aware of.'

'I will put such a restraint on my converse with thy lovely sister, as well as with Siegbert, as shall content thee. More I promise thee in gratitude to thee for thy kingly promise of the

hand of that right royal maiden. It would be as great a risk as trial for me to remain here long under such restraint. Thou knowest we come of a fiery race; a spark might set all ablaze. I will depart as soon as the festival of the Field of Mars is over, trusting to thy plighted oath and kingly power to protect, better than I could in this thine own dominion, thy sister, my betrothed wife, from harm or insult. I will proceed on my quest into Britain. When I have obtained the wolf hounds for the Emperor, I will return. Perchance thou wilt then be free of Siegbert.'

'I accept right willingly this generous offer. Thou mayest trust me to guard thy best interests with the strictest watch. I answer for their safety in my sister's heart. Tiger will be craving for more congenial pastime before thy return than he is like to find in the chamber of thy betrothed.'

'Here comes thy friend the Lord Aurelian; I will leave thee with him.'

'No, not if thou dost not wish to seek repose after these exciting topics. He will be glad of the opportunity to make thy better acquaintance. Come and take thy seat, Aurelian. Thou seest for thyself now, I trust, that we Franks do not sleep in our armour. It is a vile aspersion of thyself and countrymen.'

'How do I know,' replied Aurelian, laughing, 'but that you have both stripped it off to deceive me, and will brace it on when I am gone before you lie down?'

'I never thought of that,' said Chlovis, laughing also. 'That is well invented! Come, thou must pledge us both as a forfeit for that speech, in a draught from this renowned horn.'

'I would gladly pay a forfeit to get off that forfeit,' said Aurelian; 'not that I am so churlish as to be unwilling to pledge thee and thy valiant guest; but, with thy pleasure, we will put it off till after to-morrow's Mallum. I am bound for my bear skins. We shall want our best wits all of us to-morrow, and sleep is the best sharpener of them. I recommend sleep to both of you. Thou hast often called me thy sage physician, my good lord; believe me, follow my example.'

‘Thou art always right, Aurelian! Stay, Sigismer, I will conduct thee to thy chamber door. It is but hospitable.’

‘My page shall restore thy mantle in the morning,’ said Sigismer to the King as they proceeded along the peristyle. ‘Or rather, if thou wilt not object, I will send thee one in exchange, and keep this in memory of thy goodwill and promise to me this night. The cloak I shall send thee was a gift of the Emperor, and a right royal garment it is!’

‘It is all settled between myself and Sigismer,’ said the King to Aurelian, as, having accepted his cousin’s exchange with cordiality, he returned to his room. ‘It was good counsel of thine, and agreed marvellous well with mine own wishes.’

The next morning dawned bright and auspicious, and the streets were already thronged with the citizens of Soissons, anxious not to lose sight of the passage of the warriors to the Mallum. As all the curious and unoccupied had inspected the ampitheatre and its wonders on the previous day, the field of Council had but few visitors, and even these vanished as the hour of the meeting drew on. The place, however, did not remain long deserted, as group after group of mounted Franks continued to arrive, whilst the shouts in the town told of the passage of others to the place of meeting.

Louder than ever rose the shouts as Chlovis rode through the streets accompanied by his cousin Sigismer, followed by Aurelian and Siegbert. The visor of the King was up, his bright countenance was radiant, his eye beaming with conscious power. He carried in his hand a truncheon of command, and from beneath his shining cuirass the folds of the mystic tunic escaped, as fresh as the day when he first wore it. A green cloak, the colour of wisdom and counsel, was on his shoulders, and a helmet of burnished gold on his head, circled with a coronet fleur-de-lysed. Sigismer eclipsed all in richness of costume and appointment. He seemed already to consider himself a bridegroom, and entitled to dress accordingly, while his handsome face reflected an inward joy, born of his last night’s conference with the King. Aurelian could not help drawing a most unfavourable comparison between the dull and

jealous Siegbert and this favoured darling of fortune, who had only to appear to gain all hearts, even that of so clear-sighted and skilled a judge of men as the King.

On arriving at the amphitheatre, Chlovis alighted. Aurelian, throwing his bridle to his page, preceded the King into the lower circle of the inclosure, receiving from him his truncheon of command, and giving into his hand a long ash wand, overlaid with silver and tipped with a dove<sup>3</sup> of the same metal. This office was conceded to Aurelian by general consent, as a proof of the friendship and confidence reposed in him. The Mallum was then opened by the customary ceremonies of placing it under the protection of the gods, and devoting to their wrath all who interrupted it by insolence or seditious disturbances. The chiefs and most renowned warriors sat near the King on the lower tier or step, whilst the younger men occupied the higher seats. It was a goodly sight to see the well filled arena, and all the arrangements had been so well carried out that no confusion or mistake could arise.

The preliminaries over, a dead silence fell on the assembly, and the King, in a full clear voice declared the Mallum opened. He spoke in a few short sentences of the raid of Gwench'lan in his absence, and the measures he proposed to ensure a full reprisal. The enumeration of the spoil lately won was then made by those to whom the task had been allotted of sorting and cataloguing it. A loud shouting and clashing of arms greeted the end of this part of the proceedings by the whole assembly, visitors included. Never had such a goodly spoil been declared as the result of one single foray. The next thing would have been to name the portions assigned to each; before, however, this announcement could be made, the King once more rose from his seat, and proposed to the warriors to ransom the spoil, in order that he might send it to the Eduan King, to show him of what mettle they were. He hinted at a closer alliance with the King of Burgundy, tending to increase their power and influence and advance their establishment as the great nation he was desirous they

<sup>3</sup> 'A dove,' the symbol of wisdom.

should become, instead of remaining the predatory bands of free lances they were then, liable to be swept out of the country at any time by some of the nations their arms now held at bay. Alluding to the long list of the spoil, he told them that it was not possible to redeem it entirely with gold, and he therefore proposed that to those who wished it allods, or freeholds of land, should be granted as part payment of each share of the booty.

Loud shouts and clashing of arms welcomed this proposal, nor was it till some minutes had elapsed that the excitement subsided. The King then told them that though he had but desolate land to offer them, yet it was capable of yielding a rich produce under careful tillage, drawing their attention to the fruitful lands of the monks in the new monastery which the holy Remigius had founded, which not so long before were but a sterile desert. 'They spared not,' he said, 'to employ those hands skilled to indite books, or missives, or treaties we are not skilled to indite for ourselves, in a manual labour which enables them to maintain their community with the fruits of their toil, and to distribute to the poor and needy. Nor do I desire to see you, brave comrades, wielding spade and pickaxe, beating your swords to ploughshares. War I know is the delight of freemen, and therefore I propose that on the slaves and captives should devolve the task of preparing the land and carrying on the culture required.' He then continued to picture to his warriors the aspect of their land after a few months' careful tillage, pledging himself, as far as it was possible to him, to allow no slight provocation to cause him to take up arms and infringe a peace so needful to carry out the redeeming of these lands.

As the King paused in his speech, Chilperic the Merovingian rose and proposed to the assembled warriors to present the spoil to the King their leader, as a tribute to the valour which had enabled them to obtain it. It suited warriors best to receive their lands as free gifts from the King to be held on military tenure of fealty, than as ransom of 'a few cows and swine—a traffic unworthy the warriors of a great

King.' This proposal of the proud, high-minded Merovingian was received with rapturous shouts by his comrades. His martial figure, his long fair hair, denoting his descent and kinship to the King, giving weight to his words and prestige to his counsel.

A skirmish of generous protestation then arose between the King and his warriors, ending, however, in the amicable arrangement that the spoil should be sent to the King of Burgundy, the gold vessels to be presented to the church of the 'good Remigius, their best friend,' as a joint offering from the King and his warriors. The King suggested that the Archbishop Remigius should be invited to come to the Field of Mars to receive the gift himself, or to send some one to represent him. As time pressed, Chlovis asked Aurelian to be their ambassador to the Archbishop, and begged him to depart for Rheims at once—a request to which Aurelian readily assented, and mounting his horse, left the field on his most welcome errand.

The business of the Mallum ended with a few remarks from the King, as well as a promise on his part to cause a speedy partition of the land. Chlovis then rose and returned to Soissons at the head of the warriors, a goodly procession, chanting as they rode along songs in honour of their King and the new kingdom of France of which they had thus laid the first stone.



## CHAPTER XI.

### *The Field of Mars.*

It was but half an hour after sunrise, yet the streets, still damp with the heavy night dew, were rapidly filling with eager spectators, bending towards those points each thought best adapted to give a good view of the passage of the Frank warriors on their way to the Field of Mars, a vast inclosure to the north-east of the city. Strong barriers had been erected along the whole course of the procession, to keep the crowd within due bounds and prevent their pressing too closely on the horses, as well as to keep the line of the procession unbroken. Various openings had been left to enable the chiefs and their followers to fall into the line, and take the places assigned to them.

The corners thus cut off from the line were the chief gathering points of the excited citizens. The most favoured one was a sort of half circle formed by the intersection of streets leading to the palace. A lively conversation was being carried on in one of the foremost groups at this point. They loudly canvassed the merits of each warrior as he passed on his way to the general rendezvous, the women criticizing the qualities of his person, the men those of the accoutrements of man and horse, as well as the strength and proportions of these last.

‘Well!’ said a bright-eyed damsel with rosy cheeks and smiling lips, ‘I would not have the grinning jaws of a beast for mask to such a handsome face!’—a remark drawn forth by the passage of a warrior with a wolf’s head forming the crest and vizor of his helmet. ‘And look, look, there is a whole troop following him!’

‘That is Ragnacair, King of Cambray,’ answered the matron standing beside her, ‘and those are his warriors, but you really must not shout so, it is not decorous.’

‘They seem to have looked pretty well to their accoutrements,’ observed a man standing beside the young girl.

‘They had need,’ answered another close to him. ‘That must have been a famous warning to them all when this man, Chlovis, struck down the soldier with his francisque merely because of a screw loose somewhere in his armour. I marvel they who call themselves free companions should tamely submit to such summary proceedings.’

‘The loose screw was not in his armour,’ replied his companion, ‘or else what did the King mean by saying, as he struck him, “Remember the vase at Soissons!” I believe he only seized the first occasion to punish the man signally before his comrades for an act of disobedience to the authority with which they had fully invested the King, and to mark his firm purpose to prevent any sacrilegious depredation of Church property. The King is most particular on this last point.’

‘I have heard a great deal of that vase of Soissons,’ said a young man standing near the two friends; ‘what was it all about?’

‘The Archbishop of Rheims claimed as Church property a vase taken in the plunder of Soissons, when Syagrius was driven from it by Chlovis and his Franks. Before any one knew that it belonged to the Church, it had been allotted to this man in his share of the spoil. He refused to give it up to the King, who, for Chlovis is as just as he is of a cool and consummate prudence, offered him three times its value out of his own share. It was nothing but dogged obstinacy which made him refuse to give it up, a defiance of the King’s authority calculated to do an irreparable injury to the whole community if passed over in silence. The King had even reasoned with the man, “How,” he had asked, “can we expect to prosper if we offend God by the desecration of His temple or by insulting His servant?” Some say the soldier carried his insubordination so far as to

strike the vase with his francisque, and that it was taken from him and returned to the Archbishop in that bad plight.'

'Here they come, at last,' shouted one of the crowd. 'No, it is only another troop!' 'I tell you it is the procession of the warriors,' were the reiterated assertions and denials, whilst the front groups swayed to and fro as those behind pushed forward in their excitement to obtain a better view, not a few envying the vantage-point some boys had gained, in spite of the civil officers keeping order all along the line, by climbing up the fine trees overshadowing the length of the street.

'Yes, here they are!' shouted the excited urchins, as the head of a continuous column came in view. The crowd stretched out their necks as far as possible to catch the first glimpse of a sight the object of so much patient waiting.

Never had such a gathering of Franks traversed the streets of Soissons on their way to a Field of Mars. The King of Metz and his followers had come in since the Mallum, and other relations and allies of Chlovis. It was a long procession of more than four thousand warriors, and it was some time before the crest of the King appeared in the distance, a rallying point for all the eager watching eyes of the fairer portion of the spectators.

'Oh, do look!' said the young girl, now quite in the front, 'here comes the King at last. Is that the Eastern Prince riding beside him? What a mine of gold and silk and embroidery. Did you ever see such a splendid tunic?'

'How handsome the King is,' said the matron standing beside her. 'What splendid armour!'

'Talk of armour,' said one of the two men looking on, 'look at Aurelian the Gaul. That is a costume, if you like,' he continued, an expression of regret tempering his admiration. 'You will not see many such in these days. It is the costume of a Roman knight, and he is the last of a body whose renown will live to the last days of the human race.'

'What a strange shield he bears. It looks as if it had a cover of leather on it,' remarked the matron, 'black leather with a gold cross and rays in the midst. I wonder whether

‘there is anything beneath it. Do you know?’ she asked of the man who spoke last.

‘No, nor any one else, I believe,’ he answered; ‘I do not think any one has ever seen that shield uncovered. They say it is the portrait of a lady to whom he was to have been married, but she died.’

‘Merovæus, Merovæus, the white sea horse!’ shouted the crowd, the cries rolling nearer and nearer as the Merovingian Princes rode on. ‘Chlovis, Chlovis!’ they re-echoed, wild with the excitement such a pageant inspired.

‘That is young Ethelbert and his friend Athanaric, immediately behind the King,’ said one of the men to the young girl, as the King’s body guard passed before them.

‘What sort of a beast is that he bears on his shield?’ asked the woman of the obliging informant. ‘A white weasel; what a strange fancy.’

‘That is an ermine, but why he wears it I cannot tell. And that is a hawk on his helmet. That is quite a new thing.’

‘He forged that hawk yesterday,’ said a young man whose hands gave evident token of his work. ‘I never saw one work so determinately at the anvil, forging that helmet till late at night. He was at work when I took home his shield which he had worried my master all day to get ready for him. It is properly engraved too, and looks very well, lying in the centre of the gold cross on the blue ground. He would not tell my master what the device meant, but said it was a whim. But my master knew better, and said the ermine had something to do with Armorica.’

But now a fresh theme of admiration called forth the delighted shouts of the crowd. This was the young troop under the charge of the Comes. Not wild with excitement, as when they went to the wolf hunt, but riding in perfect order, with grave and subdued looks. They appeared deeply impressed with the importance of a soldier-like bearing on such an occasion as the present. There was such a look of determination on each face not to suffer a single muscle to relax,

contrasting with their youthful faces and starry eyes, that more than one matron expressed aloud her desire to snatch them from their horses and smother them with kisses. The look of superb and contemptuous indignation on the countenance of Prince Theodoric when such an undignified and womanish proposal met his ear, gave fresh delight to the women, and called forth the smiles of the men, a new indignity in the eyes of the young troop, and highly resented by them all.

This was the close of the long procession, the head of which had already reached the Field of Mars, and people now began to move off in the same direction, that they might lose nothing of the sight.

The crowd lining the opposite corner to those watching the passage of the warriors had seen the Princess and her ladies leave the palace and proceed on their way to the Field of Mars. The Princess stood alone in her chariot, followed by pages and equerries and a picked body of Frank guards under the command of Chararic. The noble Antrusion rode alongside the royal chariot in friendly conversation with the Princess, who that morning surpassed even her usual attractions of person and manner. Fastened with a slender gold chain to her jewelled bracelet, 'Tiger' sat in hoodwinked gravity on the wrist of his royal mistress, who carried him with a princely bearing that had filled the fast bounding heart of Sigismer with delight. Tutored by the King, and greatly to the approbation of Chlovis, he had restrained himself, and suffered Siegbert to conduct her to her chariot, an office he would not willingly have yielded to any one. He could not, however, prevail on himself to sacrifice, nor could the King expect it of him, the delight of expressing to her with his looks, as she passed him in the chariot, all the pleasure her presence inspired. The gracious and meaning smile she bestowed on him, the expression of delight, regard, and admiration in her eyes as she gazed on his face, beaming with conscious joy and dauntless valour, filled the heart of Sigismer with an emotion which made him ride that day by the side of Chlovis the proudest and most daring of all the armed ranks.

On arriving at the Field of Mars, the Princess and her ladies, descending from their chariots, were ushered by the attendants into a high gallery erected for them in a part of the field from whence they would have the best view of the proceedings. Immediately below their gallery was a raised platform, or grassed mound, on which the King and his immediate officers were to take their stand. As soon as the ladies were seated, a covered car was drawn up, under the escort of half a dozen armed men of the King's own body guard. This strange looking vehicle excited much curiosity and speculation as to its contents, following, as it did, immediately in the wake of the royal chariot. An artillery of bright eyes was now directed on this mysterious car, as the Antrusion, riding up, superintended the removal of a heavy chest from its depths, which was conveyed with some trouble into the ladies' gallery, and placed in its remotest corner. The car then disappeared, whilst the guard which had accompanied it took up a station round and beneath the gallery.

'It is the treasure—the sacred vessels,' said Llantildis to her friends; 'the gold vases and jewelled cross to be presented to the Cathedral of Rheims. I heard the Archbishop would come himself to receive the present.'

Whilst Llantildis was yet giving her friends this piece of information, the head of the procession appeared on the plain. On they came, a long, winding train, four abreast, of stout warriors, their horses stepping proudly, the arms and corslets of the riders gleaming in the sun, the tips of their sharp spears glowing like points of living fire. The long drawn-out notes of the trumpets and the sound of martial music preceded them, a sound which caused the Princess and her ladies to smile with anticipated pleasure.

The troops took up their position in the same order in which they arrived, defiling to the left, whilst the King and the chiefs immediately surrounding him set spurs to their horses, and cantering across the plain, took up their station prepared in front of the ladies' gallery. Chlovis, as he rode up, saluted

them with a gracious smile of recognition, an example followed by Sigismer and the rest of the chiefs.

As soon as the troops were drawn up, the King and his chiefs rode slowly down the long line, and up the second, so placed as to allow a convenient passage, inspecting minutely as he passed, the armour and accoutrements of each warrior. His satisfaction was expressed in tones and language calling forth responding smiles on the face of each warrior he addressed. He well knew how to reprimand any deficiency, but he also knew well how to praise. They were all in high good humour with him, and inwardly swore that there was not another leader who knew so well what a warrior was worth, or treated him with so much consideration and respect. As they presently defiled before him, after his return to his station in front of the ladies' gallery, they clashed their shields with a will, and the cries of 'Hurrah hoch, for Chlovis! hurrah hoch, for the King of France!' rose loudly above the blare of the trumpets and the clashing of cymbals, whilst the Princess and the ladies added to the general enthusiasm by waving their handkerchiefs and veils, and smiling most graciously on them.

The march past finished, each man resumed his former position, and the chiefs rode back to the head of their respective followers. The whole troop then went through the usual evolutions, ending at last by their separation into two bands, taking opposite sides of the field, the King remaining alone with Aurelian and Sigismer at their stations on the platform. At a signal given by Chlovis, a party of warriors detached itself from each of these two bands, and setting their horses at full speed, met in mid field with a shock which sent several on each side rolling in the dust. These were speedily helped to their feet, and as they had tilted at each other with blunt spears, not much harm had been done. The vanquished were not allowed, however, to take part in the tilting again, retiring into the background to look on at those who had kept their seats better. After another and another party had dashed at each other till all had taken a part in the mimic fray, they went

through all sorts of evolutions, wheeling, charging at each other, now with their francisques, now in closer combat with sword and shield. All this was in perfect good faith, as it would have been thought Niding, or infamous, to carry out any private quarrel on the Field of Mars, or profit by the opportunity for revenge.

And now began what was thought the prettiest sight of the day by the crowd of spectators encircling the field. The evolutions of the older warriors over, they had returned to their positions, and then the young troop, riding into the arena, went through the same in their turn. Amongst the most fiery of these youthful soldiers the young Theodoric bore away the palm. Flying on his Norwegian pony, his long fair hair streaming behind him, not a few of his antagonists rolled in the dust beneath his furious onset, whilst the ladies clapped their hands, and the warriors shouted and clashed their shields. Theodoric seemed possessed with the true Boersirkir spirit; and some of his companions began to feel angry thus to be surpassed by a boy so much younger than most of them, whilst Chlovis sat silent and erect, his dark grey eyes kindling with pride as he watched narrowly and with criticizing eye the management and skill at arms of the son, as yet sole heir to his power and renown.

Other trials of skill succeeded the mimic contest, the young aspirants to glory throwing the lance, wheeling the francisque, leaping poles of different height, with other exercises of the same description. In all these Theodoric seemed determined to bear away the prize, and the boy's eyes flashed fire as he rode up in his turn for a fresh trial if any of his companions bid fair to surpass him. Animated with such a spirit, and the approving looks of the Comes and the three umpires, judges of these trials, he did not fall far below the success at which he aimed. Loud were the acclamations which greeted each announcement of his name as first in the class to which his age confined him, and his eyes glowed with eager anticipation when, the trials ended, the prizes were to be awarded, and the hour of his final triumph had arrived.



With a look of conscious pride he wheeled round his Norwegian, panting and flecked with foam, to join the Comes, who had given him the signal to advance. When the ceremony was over of investing half a dozen youths who had attained the age of fifteen with the long coveted sword of battle and the white shield of expectation, no less a warrior than the noble Antrusion rode up to the young Prince, whilst Chilperic the Merovingian came up on the other side. The face of Theodoric flushed scarlet. He had not dreamed that he should be led up to the King by two such renowned warriors. He was too young to understand that it was as much to show their goodwill and friendly disposition to the King as to honour the young aspirant to military fame that they had advanced to lead him up to his father and future leader. Dismounting, they gave their horses in charge to their equerries, and taking hold one on each side of the mettlesome Norwegian, they led the young Prince up to the King, now standing on the platform. Theodoric sprang to the ground, and going down on one knee, laid his small sword at his father's feet. Chlovis, taking a golden circlet from the hands of Aurelian, placed it on the head of the boy, speaking words of proud commendation and hopes of future renown, as well as counsel never to do aught to disgrace the golden symbol of his high rank, which he was now deemed worthy to assume. Bidding him resume his sword, whose services he accepted as freely as they were tendered, he told him to take up his station amongst the chiefs and Princes around him. Other prizes were then distributed to the young competitors, and then a sort of pause ensued, as if in anticipation of some new diversion. A movement was evidently taking place amongst the warriors, where one after another the youngest men were hastily dismounting, giving their spears and the bridles of their horses in charge to their comrades.

As it was not quite nine o'clock when the warriors rode into the field, and the different evolutions and trials of skill generally lasted about three hours, every one knew that it could not now be far from twelve o'clock, the hour at which

the sword dance would take place. For a moment or two the spectators began to fear they would be disappointed in this part of the ceremonies of the day, as it was known the King was always well disposed to consult the wishes of Remigius, and it was equally well known how much the venerable Archbishop was opposed to the celebration of this heathen rite. It seemed evident enough the conscientious scruples of the pious Prelate were not shared by the mass of his flock. Christianity was not as yet a fully restraining power among the generality of the professing Gauls, though the true earnest spirit of religion was by no means confined to the breasts of the clergy and the inhabitants of the monasteries vowed to a religious life.

The momentary fear of disappointment was soon dispelled, and the general satisfaction was apparent when six hundred young men fully armed, with shields advanced and drawn swords in their hands, came into the midst of the field, forming with a rapid movement a circle three deep. When this was accomplished there was another pause, as if the exact moment had not yet arrived. At length it came, the fact being announced by the solitary clang of two cymbals struck together, a signal followed by the blare of trumpets and a burst of martial music. The dance instantly commenced, the young men chanting as they moved a song supposed to describe the yearly evolution of the sun throughout the zodiac, evolutions they were supposed to imitate in the mazy circle they traced in and out with a precision and correctness utterly bewildering to any not understanding its regular changes. Arrived at certain points both of the circle and their song, they clashed their shields with their swords, singing a sort of rhythm, whilst the martial music rose louder and the warriors answered in wild chorus—

Blood and wine and dance to thee, Sun ; blood and wine and dance.

Dance and song, song and battle, and dance and song.

Dance of the sword in circle, dance of the sword.

Song of the blue sword, fierce in battle ; song of the blue sword.

Battle where the strongest is King, battle of the fierce sword.

O sword, O great King of the battlefield ! O sword, O great King !

Blood and wine and dance to thee, Sun ; blood and wine and dance.<sup>1</sup>

This dance, performed with ease and flexible grace and great spirit, elicited shouts of applause from the spectators, and gave evident satisfaction to all the Franks present.

‘I should say it was pretty much the same as the much talked of Pyrrhic dance,’ said one of the three men who had taken part in the conversation during the gathering of the troops in the morning, and who were now standing in the front ranks of the spectators.

‘Exactly the same, I should say, in execution as well as meaning. It is strange what a constant similarity recurs in these customs and manners of such seeming widely different nations. I have a shrewd idea that all come pretty much from the same stock.’

‘And I am sure of it,’ said his companion. ‘But what are they going to do next?’

<sup>1</sup> De Villemarques, *Chants de la Bretagne*.

## CHAPTER XII.

### *The Song of the Skald.*

Busy preparations were taking place near the ladies' gallery, causing more than one person to ask his neighbour the same question. Some planks were produced and fastened on supports, forming a table, over which a cloth was laid of crimson and gold, and the whole carried up to the platform where the King was still standing. The chest that had been so carefully placed in the ladies' gallery was next brought out, and the King handing a key to Aurelian desired him to open it and place the gold vessels on the table.

These preparations completed, the Franks, all now remounted, were drawn up on three sides of a square, the table in the midst of a fourth. The King once more on horseback, with the chiefs near him, seemed to be waiting some new advent. The Franks might well be proud of their offering of thanksgiving. The massive gold vessels, some richly set with jewels, were all designed for and had been consecrated to the most sacred uses, and the crowd looking on were loud in approbation of the royal treasure and the generosity of the donors. A distant sound of sacred music began to make itself heard, gradually drawing nearer, whilst a hush of surprise and expectancy fell on the scene where all before had been noise and excitement. At a sign from Chlovis, the chiefs returned to the head of their respective followers.

And now the music grew louder, and chanted litanies could be distinguished as it came nearer. A long procession entered the Field of Mars, not of a warlike character this time, but one armed only with symbols of peace and tokens of

a sacred mission. First came one bearing aloft a large silver cross, light flashing from its polished surface as it caught the rays of the sun. Next came, two and two, those carrying banners, the foremost amongst these being the portrait of our Saviour, painted on wood, and set in a gold frame inlaid with precious stones. Then came others, playing on instruments the long drawn out melody accompanying the singers chanting the litanies as they went along. The priests of the diocese walked next, and the clergy immediately serving the cathedral preceded the Archbishop, vested in a splendid cope, and wearing a jewelled mitre. It was evident that as soon as the Archbishop had decided on coming in person to receive the thank-offering of the King and his followers, he had also determined to render the ceremony as imposing as he meant it to be impressive on the men he so longingly yearned to bring within the fold of the Church.

There were many there, Chlovis among the rest, who could not fail to be struck with the coincidence of a procession of this sacred nature sweeping over the spot where one of the last ceremonies of heathen rites, now fast disappearing from the land, had so lately taken place. It seemed almost as if the Catholic Church, hearing the echoes of that ferocious hymn in honour of a deity whose altar for ages had reeked with human gore, had arisen in her power to rebuke the practice, and had come out, in virtue of her divine commission, to sweep it for ever from off the face of the earth, and purify the desecrated spot with sacred chant and prayer. Chlovis inly vowed that it was the last time the sword dance should take place where he had any authority, come what might of his resolution. He spoke a few words to Aurelian, and then galloped up to the Franks, who were watching with increased surprise the solemn advance of a procession so strange and new to them.

‘Friends! comrades!’ he said to them, in firm but rapid tone; ‘this great honour done to us by the venerable Archbishop is as great a pleasure to me as it can be to you. Let it be ours with all dutiful and respectful reception of such a friendly disposition towards us, such a mark of implicit

confidence in our good faith, to show them how greatly we esteem it.'

'Ja wohl! ja wohl!' re-echoed round the lines of the Franks, now wrought to a pitch of extraordinary enthusiasm and devotion to the King, and to the men advancing into their very midst, unarmed, save with the highest and most spiritual weapons.

So absorbed was the general attention in the now near procession, that no one seemed to have noticed the active preparations going on at a point to which it yet seemed to be converging. A space had been cleared and inclosed with crimson hangings, dependent from bright spear-tipped rods, drawn from the depths of a covered car standing near. An altar was quickly formed of planks raised on tressels, and an antependium thrown over it, made of white silk, embroidered with flowers in coloured silk mixed with gold thread. Out of this same car tall golden candlesticks were produced, into which large wax tapers were fitted, and a gold crucifix inlaid with precious stones. These were placed on the altar in due symmetry, and the servitors withdrew as soon as they had completed the arrangements, taking the now empty car with them.

The procession defiled in front of the King where he stood awaiting its approach, Aurelian and Sigismer on each side of him. Up towards the provisionary altar it passed, the clergy dividing, as they reached it, to right and left, ranging themselves on each side of the dais on which it was placed. The Archbishop, passing through the midst of the living semicircle they thus formed, ascended the steps of the altar, and bowed before the crucifix in silent prayer, remaining absorbed in this devotion till the litanies came to a close.

During this time Chlovis, by a well executed manœuvre, changed the open front of the square formed by the warriors, thus causing the altar and its attendants to form the head of the inclosure. The table with the treasure was then brought into the new square, and placed in the midst of it, the King and his two companions retiring behind it. The Archbishop, resuming his crozier, a true shepherd's crook, in his hand,

wherewith he drew many a trembling wandering sheep into the fold, descended from the predella and went towards the King. Chlovis, hastily dismounting, went to meet the venerable Prelate, who had thus honoured their proffered gift by coming in person to receive it. He exchanged a hearty greeting with him, and then both drew near the table where lay the glittering spoil. In a loud clear voice Chlovis prayed the Archbishop to accept it from the hands of his valiant companions in arms and himself, for the service of the Catholic Church, as a thank-offering for their late success, which they could not but feel they owed to the prayers of that Church.

A murmur of delight ran along the lines of the mounted warriors when they found the Archbishop was going to address them. A warning look from Chlovis restrained this slight demonstration, and they listened in profound silence to words, which to their farther astonishment were uttered in their own language.

‘Valiant Franks!’ he said to them, ‘I accept in the name of the Holy Church you protect from the inroads of barbarian hordes, the thank-offering of your grateful hearts. It is a precious offering of gold and silver and jewels for the service of the King of Kings, Whose unworthy servants we are. Were it not too long a tale for the present occasion, I would tell you from the altars of what churches these had been carried off, and by whom. All to which I will now draw your attention is this—learn, from the fact of your having been enabled to restore these vessels to their sacred uses, how much you are favoured by the great Ruler and Disposer of events, and learn from the confusion of your enemies the fate that will always overtake all who defy His powerful arm and lightly set His omnipotence at naught. I have said, valiant warriors. Be this our presence among you this auspicious day a renewed proof of the amity we bear you, and the assurance of our constant fervent prayers for your welfare.’

So awed were the Franks by the venerable mien, the dignity of the Archbishop, the deep tones of his voice, the authority with which he spoke, that when he had ceased not a sound

from their ranks broke the silence with which they had listened to him. The voice of the King, calling on them to name those who should present the treasure to the Archbishop, dissolved the charm. Cries of 'The King, the King!' 'The Lord Aurelian!' the names of their respective leaders, suggested to Chlovis the decision of calling all the chiefs to take a part in the presentation, and he soon found himself the centre of a warlike group. Taking up the table, they carried it towards the dais, where the Archbishop again bowed in silent prayer before the altar. Chlovis, receiving each vase in its turn, passed it to Aurelian, who placed it in the hands of the Archbishop. Each time a fresh vase was placed by this last upon the altar, he prayed that the gift might prove acceptable in the sight of Him Who knew the secrets of all hearts, and that their offering might be to the drawing towards Him of all present. This ceremony of the presentation lasted for some time, amidst the profound silence of all that vast multitude assembled on the field. When the last vase was presented, the treasure was put back into the covered car, and given in charge to the Antrustion and a body of armed Franks. Chlovis warmly pressed the Archbishop to join them at the banquet that afternoon, but he, knowing that his presence would be too much of a restraint on the exuberant feelings of the warriors, which the proceedings of the day fully warranted, counselled the King not to desire it. The return procession was quickly formed. The car with the treasure led the way, the Princess Llantildis, escorted on each side by Prince Sigismar and King Siegbert, came next, whilst the King and Aurelian rode on each side of the Archbishop.

The interior of a long and spacious wooden building erected for the banquet was tastefully decorated with banners of bright colours and strange devices, trophies of glittering arms, and hangings of rich stuffs. At the upper end was a platform, raised by several steps, running the whole breadth of the room, covered with a rich carpet. A long table stood on it, and seats for the more distinguished amongst the guests. The middle seat was reserved for the King, and was raised a step higher than the others and was furnished with a footstool.



Over this seat was a rich canopy, supported by columns,<sup>1</sup> the two front ones being decorated by cross stripes of various bright colours. The other tables ran the whole length, except the two opposite the royal canopy. These were shorter, in order to admit of a raised seat, on which the skald, or poet-minstrel would take his place after the banquet. In this hall the banquet of Chlovis and his guests went on, with great gaiety but greater decorum, the presence of the Princess and her ladies at the feast contributing not a little to promote a restraining influence.

After the more substantial part of the feast had been disposed of, the tables were heaped with fruits of all kinds, a plentiful supply of mead, and wine out of the King's cellar, was produced, and the different toasts were drunk with shouts of 'Waeshaël,' especially vehement when the King drank to the health of the 'good and holy Remigius.'

When all the toasts had been duly honoured, a growing excitement began to manifest itself, increasing when Aurelian was seen to rise, descend from his place at the royal table, and mount the seat prepared for the minstrels. Loud cries of joyous greeting welcomed him, as he took from the hands of a page the small Gaulish harp on which he usually accompanied himself. These cries sunk into silence as he bent over his harp, trying its chords—'telling it,' so said the Franks, 'all he wished it to say,' and agreeing with it as to the respective parts each was to bear in the coming performance. A profound silence reigned in the numerous assembly as, the prelude chords hushed, Aurelian, raising his head with a thoughtful movement, commenced in a full clear tenor, filling the hall with its ringing notes, the famous lay of the Siege of Orleans.

We sing the deeds of our forefathers, that we may emulate their fame and become in our turn the theme of glowing song.

Deep in the bosom of the gloomy forest of Hercynia, Attila the Hun,<sup>2</sup> the king over kings, the devastator of nations, sleeps on his wooden pallet, heaped with the skins of beasts he has slain in the chase.

<sup>1</sup> Mallet, *North. Antiq.*

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon.

Swift descended from the heavenly courts, Gabriel the messenger of God, Gabriel the mighty archangel, Gabriel the strength of God.

His helmet was a pure diamond ; his snowy plumes reflected the hues of the rainbow. His starry falchion glittered at his side, its radiance filled the chamber of sleep with light ; the spear of eternal truth was in his hand.

'Arise, Attila ! scourge of God ! The nations have forgotten My laws ; rebellious towards Me, sunk in luxury and sloth, they are become even as the beasts that perish.

'Arise ! Attila ! scourge of God ! Go forth, slay, destroy, devastate ! Let the nations fall before thy sword.'

Attila sprang from his wooden pallet, heaped with the skins of beasts he had slain in the chase.

'To arms ! to arms ! Kindle the beacon-fires ! let them leap from hill to hill, let them fill the valleys with threatening light !

'Let the fires leap ! let them tell forth the tidings that Attila, the scourge of God, girds on the sword of Mars,<sup>3</sup> the invincible sword that fell from heaven.

'Call the eagles from their nests in the inaccessible cliffs, the wolves from the depths of the far off forests ; let them know that Attila goes forth to war, Attila the provider of food for the ravening beasts of prey.

'Let the wolves respond in long howls to the summons. Let the eagles scream, soaring above the giddy heights, "There will be food for our young. Attila goes forth to war, Attila the destroyer of nations."

He marched forth surrounded by his invincible hordes. To him gathered the kings of the earth ; to him came the chiefs of the Ostrogoths, the three valiant brothers. Walamir and Widimir were there, and Theodimir, father of the great Theodoric, the valiant King of Italy.

To him gathered the fierce Rugians ; from the shores of the Baltic came the Heruli, the dark hunters of the vast icy plains. The warlike Edui came ; Ardaric was there, chief of the Gepidæ, of ferocious countenance and wild cries, armed with the twanging bow, the swift-winged arrow.

The fierce Thuringians came, the hoofs of their horses were red, the hoofs of their horses who trod into the earth the tender virgins of Cambray and Terouanne.

On they came, five hundred thousand was their number.<sup>4</sup> The flight of their arrows made dark the face of the sun at midday ;

<sup>3</sup> Gibbon.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

the breath of their trumpets rent the clouds ; the clouds thundered as when the lightning rends them.

The standard of Attila floated aloft, the 'Ravager of the World' flapped its mighty folds in front of the Nations. The Kings of Germania, of Scythia, from the ice-bound Volga to the sluggish Danube, flowing between its borders, obeyed the warlike summons. The 'Ravager of the World' led the way, pointing to the west.

Then fell the trees of the forest of Hercynia, those ancient trees where, sheltered beneath their spreading boughs, the wild boar nestled, the shaggy bear slept in the forks of their branches.

They spanned the blue Rhine with a bridge of trees ; into Belgica spread their hordes with resistless violence.

Gaul heard in wild affright the warlike shouts of this innumerable host ; the shrieks of the villagers flying before their fury. So fly the wild beasts of the forest before the roaring fire kindled by the bolt of heaven.

So roared like a devouring fire the fierce hordes of Attila ; the smiling lands over which they passed were left brown and desolate ; like devouring locusts, the scourge of God, devastation marked their path.

Then fell Tongres and Metz, Terouanne fell before their fury. Cambray, Besançon, Dijon stood not the shock of their onset. The eagles and the wolves were the rearguard of his horde, they feasted on the flesh of men.

Wild rose the wailing litanies in the churches of Gaul : '*Kyrie eleison*—Lord Christ, save us from the arrows of the Huns !'

From the walls of Troyes issued the dauntless Lupus, the servant of the most high God. Lupus, the shepherd of Christ, confronted the terrible Hun.

Full of confidence in God, Whom he had implored for his people, fasting for many days prostrate on the ground.

Beyond the walls of the city he passed. The priests of the most high God came in procession behind him ; before him was carried the cross of his Master, the cross of Christ the Lord.

'Who art thou?' boldly he asked of the fierce barbarian.

'I am Attila, the scourge of God, sent to chastise the people for their sins.'

'Let us respect whatever comes to us from God,' said the holy man ; but thou, proud man, tremble to do aught that Almighty hand, that moves and governs thee, permits.'

Amazed, Attila fell back ; his countenance was abashed before

the lofty rebuke. <sup>5</sup>Better than impregnable walls is the defence of the prayers of the saints.

He passed on ; he left untouched the city of Troyes, that city where were neither arms nor garrison, nor food for the people.

He passed on, nor could he reach Paris ; Paris where prayed the holy Geneviève, fasting for many days prostrate on the floor, the floor of the sanctuary of God. Better than impregnable walls is the defence of the prayers of the saints.

Over the Sequana passed the fierce hordes, the Sequana below Auxerre, Auxerre the city of the white acacias.

Sangibar the traitor, Sangibar the Alan, waited in the plains of Orleans, waited for Attila the Hun ; to see him come, to open to him the gates, the gates of the city of Orleans.

Who discovered his treachery ? Who flew to stop, ere it was too late, the evil purpose of the traitor ?

From wall to wall he sped, Amian, the faithful shepherd of Christ ; Amian, the Bishop of Orleans.

His exhortations manned the battlements, his courage inspired the warriors ; at his persuasions the peaceful citizens took up arms.

The battering-rams of Attila shook the walls ; the cries of the women, of the aged, rose from the sacred inclosures of the sanctuaries of God ; prostrate before the altar they lay.

From their lips night and day arose the wailing litanies : '*Kyrie eleison*—Lord Christ, save us from the arrows of the Huns !'

Aetius the Roman consul, Aetius the patrician, heard from afar the barbarian trumpet, the affrighted cries of the people. Beyond the Alps they reached.

Breathless into his presence rushed the affrighted messenger ; beyond the Alps he bore the disastrous tale ; to Aetius the consul, in the far off courts of Ravenna, where he paced the sunny terraces overlooking the waters of the blue Adriatic.

North and south, east and west, fly his messengers, winged with dire speed. The messengers of Aetius the patrician, the protector of Gaul.

'To arms ! to arms ! come from the four quarters of the earth, allies of the Empire, mistress of the world ! Attila the Hun, Attila the scourge of God, ravages the fertile plains of Gaul.'

From the west came the Armoricans, dwellers on the utmost verge of the sea, down which float the grey icebergs of the north ; the grisly bears sit on those icebergs, they laugh, they sing, 'We

<sup>5</sup> Alban Butler. 'St. Lupus.'

'feast on the blood of men, men wrecked on the sides of our rugged ships.'

With them came the Saxon, with heavy battle-axe; from the plains of Bayeux they come, where feed the sharp-horned cattle.

From the north came the Ripuarians, who dwell on the borders of three rivers, the rapid Rhine, the swift Meuse, the blue Moselle.

<sup>6</sup>Then came bounding over the plains of Gaul the fiery Franks, strong and clean limbed, on their snorting war horses. Merovæus led them on, Merovæus the white sea horse, the father of the fair-haired Merovingians, Merovæus Prince of the Sicambrians.

From the fertile plains of Savoy came the warlike Burgundians, the Breones from the borders of the lake of Constance, the placid lake in whose bosom is mirrored the sun in his summer splendour.

From the plains of Aquitaine, from the gates of Thoulouse came the warriors of the great Theodoric, Theodoric the Visigoth.

Torismond, the firstborn of his strength, rode on the right hand of the King, on the left rode Theodoric, the pride of the aged warrior, whose white hair gleamed, a silver fringe to his dark helmet.

From all sides they came, the warriors, the allies, the sons of Rome. Fertile Gallia shook from end to end with the prancing of horses, the tramp of armed men.

Of men armed to save from sacrilege the churches of God, to save from desecration the shrines of the saints.

To save the fertile plains from devastation, the fruitful vines from the scorching breath of the barbarian, the spoil ravishing of the Scythian shepherds.

Who arrested the northern inundation? Who resisted the ferocious conqueror, fired with desire to wield the dominion of the earth? Who, but the warriors of Rome, the sons, the allies of the Empire, mistress of the world?

The walls of Orleans shook beneath the battering-rams of Attila; the suburbs were entered. Loud rose the wailing litanies from the helpless aged, the weak women prostrate in the temple of God, weeping day and night: '*Kyrie eleison*—Lord Christ, save us from the arrows of the Huns!'

'It is finished,' said the weeping priest to the venerable Amian, Amian the holy Bishop, trusting in God! 'The Hun saps the walls, the suburbs are invaded, the people are lost.'

'Not so, my son,' answered Amian, the holy servant of God. 'We know in Whom we trust. A sure fortress is our God! Fly

<sup>6</sup> Gibbon.

to the ramparts, search the face of the distant country for the destined aid of God. It will come ! It comes ! When His wrath is appeased, He will have mercy and save.'

Twice returned the messenger from the ramparts ; twice stood beside the venerable Bishop, the holy Amian, encouraging the living, assuaging the pains of the wounded, shriving the dying.

'There is nothing,' said the messenger ; 'yet the battering-rams of Attila sap the walls, the suburbs are invaded, the people are lost !'

'Not so, my son ; fly to the ramparts ! Despair not of the mercy of God !'

Once more he returned to the ramparts. Like a man's hand rose the small cloud on the horizon. It rises, it grows, nearer and nearer it rolls ; there is the shining of spears, the gleaming of plumed helms. Hear the trumpet of the Romans ; see the eagle standards proudly floating !

On it comes, the deep array. Aetius the patrician is there. Aetius the Roman consul leads them on.

From the doomed city arose the rapturous cry. 'It is the aid of God !' the venerable Amian exclaimed ; 'It is the aid of God !' responded the grateful multitude ; 'It is the aid of God !' echoed back the far distant hills.

Consternation seizes the Hun, he hears the cry, he remembers the words of Lupus, of Lupus the servant of God. He sees advance the serried squadrons of Rome. From every quarter they come. The aid of God 'to the doomed city.'

Loud resound the trumpets of Attila. Back retreat the plunderers already sacking the city. He raises the siege, he flies, he dare not brave the wrath of Aetius the Roman in the heart of Gaul. Over the Saône cross the myriads of Attila, over the peaceful river affrighted with their wild and horrid looks.

They seek the plain of Chalons, that wide plain ; in tumult and disorder they seek it ; where they can deploy their unwieldy number in the open field.

Where the Scythian cavalry can wheel and turn again to the charge ; the swift-footed cavalry of the fierce Hun, from the barren plains of the frozen Euxine.

Arrived thus far, Aurelian paused, as much for rest, as to yield his place to some one else ambitious of the honours of song and verse. But his audience were not inclined for any change, at least for the present. The profound silence which

had reigned the whole time his chant lasted, the rapt attention of all eagerly listening with martial ardour, roused by the stirring theme, reviving the memory of their exploits, inspiring desire for more, testified to the power Aurelian possessed. Cries now burst forth from all sides, 'The battle of Chalons, noble skald; the battle of Chalons, noble Aurelian.' A prayer in which the voice of the Princess was also heard. Yielding to the public desire, Aurelian interchanged a smile with the King, who had handed to him the horn of Attila, half filled for his refreshment, he took up the chant where he had left off, his listeners falling back into silence as they saw his preparations to resume a subject so entrancing to them.

In tumult and affright flies Attila, Attila the scourge of God. He feared the wrath of Actius the Roman, armed for the defence of Gaul.

The vanguard of Actius pressed upon his rear, the rear of the barbarian hordes, the hordes from the plains of Scythia, swept by the icy wind of the north.

The brave allies of Aetius press upon his flanks. Then was heard the thunder of the shock of war, the tumult of combat. Then fell the hordes of Attila beneath the avenging sword.

Then rushed the fiery Franks upon the Gepidæ; the valiant Franks, led on by Merovæus, the white sea horse, the father of the fair haired Merovingians, Prince of the Sicambrians.

There fell the Gepidæ before their valour; the dead choke up the passages. Fifteen thousand feast the eagles,<sup>7</sup> dwellers in the wild fastnesses of the gloomy Vosges; the wolves of the Arduenna rushed down headlong to the banquet.

Fighting furiously they reach the plains of Catalaunia, the wide champaign of Chalons. The length of it is fifty and one hundred miles, the breadth is one hundred.

Into this mighty arena pour the routed hordes of Attila. The innumerable hosts cover the vast plain.

Attila assembles his priests.<sup>8</sup> Nothing daunted, he sacrifices to his gods, the false gods of a barbarous people. In the smoking entrails the haruspices read the doom of the Roman foe.

'Fear possesses,' cries Attila, 'the close ranks of the Romans. He pursues trembling; he awaits trembling the moment when we shall turn and overwhelm him. We will fight with renewed

<sup>7</sup> Gibbon.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

courage. To us are reserved the joys of this field, the consummation of our victories.

'The Visigoth alone can fight. We will trample on the degenerate Roman; he cannot endure the fatigue of war.'

Ardaric, chief of the Gepidæ, led the right. On the left were the Ostrogoths; the three valiant brothers led them on. They looked upon the faces of the Visigoths, arrayed against them; the Visigoths their brethren, sons of one common mother.

Attila moved in the centre. He led on his ferocious Huns. Sangibar, the faithless Alan, confronted him, placed in the midst, where treachery could not lurk unpunished.

Aetius the Roman consul confronted the Gepidæ. The aged Theodoric led the warlike Visigoths. Against him fought the three valiant brothers, chiefs of the Amali, Withimir and Waldimir, and Theodomir, father of Theodoric, the great King of Italy.

Torismond, the valiant cub of the Visigoth lion, raged on the heights, threatening the Scythian army both flank and rear.

The peoples<sup>9</sup> from the banks of the icy Volga to the shores of the ever-sounding Atlantic, met in arms in the fields, the fertile champaign of Chalons.

Similar in arms, similar in ensigns, it seemed the mighty shock of civil war, of brother armed against brother.

High rose the signal of battle, loud the blare of trumpets, the sound of martial music breathing defiance, as the hosts advanced to the mighty encounter. Loud rose the shock of battle, as the armed myriads rushed upon each other.

Attila and his Huns pierced through the feeble defence of Sangibar the Alan; Sangibar of the false heart, craven through guilt.

Attila attacks Theodoric, the valiant King, the aged warrior; his white hair gleams, a silver fringe to his dark helmet.

Along the front of his brave warriors rides the aged King; he animates them to the fight. The javelin of Andages, the noble Ostrogoth, drinks the life blood of the aged King.

He falls; the aged King drops from his horse; his white hairs are stained with dust and blood. His warriors rush to avenge him. Against them rushes Attila the Hun, and Walamir the Ostrogoth, with Widimir, and Theodomir of the Amali, father of Theodoric, the great King of Italy.

In that dread encounter, point to point, met the pride of the Ostrogoth, the strength of the Visigoth. The grave of the aged King is a mountain of the slain.

<sup>9</sup> Gibbon.



Torismond heard the war shout of Theodomir his brother, as he rushed to the conflict. His eye seeks in vain in that field of slaughter; he sees no more the plumed helm of the aged warrior. The Visigoths waver to and fro, lacking a chief, the Ostrogoths press them hard.

Down the heights as a torrent rushes the cub, to avenge the fall of the parent lion. To his aid flies Merovæus, the white sea horse.

They rush together upon the Hun; Visigoth and Frank press him on all sides. The descending sun sees the swift flashing swords drink the red blood of the Scythian. The shades of night alone save him from their unappeased fury.

Back to his camp, entrenched with war chariots, retreats the bleeding Hun; the raging Torismond is in close pursuit.

Then would have fallen the intrepid cub with the parent lion. His horse falls; the princely Torismond fights on foot in the narrow space, where the trampling hosts are red with the dust and blood of the battle.

From the heap of slain they draw the body of the aged King, covered with honourable wounds.

Loud clashed the arms of the Visigoths. They place Torismond on the elevated buckler, Torismond the King, breathing revenge for his slaughtered father.

Revenge, the most sacred portion of his paternal inheritance, not less dear to him than his crown.

Torismond rages in vain; he is borne down in the confusion of night. The valiant Merovæus rushed to his rescue, Merovæus, the white sea horse, his long fair hair streaming behind him, like the light of a baleful comet, the terrible meteor of the night.

Behind his war chariots that night lay Attila inactive, thinking of his vanished hosts.

Inactive, yet undaunted, like a lion encompassed in his den, threatening the hunters with redoubled fury.

Loud sound his instruments of martial music, a bold strain breathing defiance to the foe.

Torismond rages in vain. The arrows of the Hun check the assault of his foes, their dead bodies form a rampart to his intrenchments.

The council is held, they will starve the Hun from his shelter, force him into unequal combat, or to accept terms revolting to the soul of a warrior.

Torismond, the Visigoth, swells with rage and pride; such councils suit not a brave warrior; they are the councils of lurking cowards.

Aetius the Roman consul, sagacious in council, weighty in command, beneath the threatening brow of the Visigoth, sees a worse foe to Gaul than the devastating Hun.

He urges Torismond to depart, to seek the sunny courts of Thoulouse, lest his brother seize the royal treasure of his father. Suspicion rises in his mind. His thirst for vengeance is quenched, he departs in haste, lest his brother work him ruin.

Attila awakes, the silence of death reigns over the plains of Chalons, where raged the war shock of mighty battle. He dreads the deep laid snares of deceit ; four days he awaits intrenched behind his war chariots.

The light of a hundred watch-fires glare in the dark night. Merovæus kindles many to deceive the foe, that he may multiply the number of his warriors. Merovæus, the white sea horse, lingering in the rear of the beaten Hun.

Like a wolf barely escaped with life from the hands of the hunters, Attila creeps out from his ramparts. Towards the Rhine he steals, he seeks a passage for his shattered hosts.

Merovæus the Merovingian, Prince of the Sicambrians, pursues the beaten foe, he harasses his rear, he cuts off the stragglers, those that delay.

To the confines of Thuringia he follows. The friendly Thuringians receive the broken hosts of Attila, the proud Hun. Attila the haughty, the scourge of God.

To the confines of Gaul the valiant sword of the Frank pursued the routed Hun. The sword of Merovæus, the white sea horse, fell upon the retreating hosts of the Hun, driving him back towards the depths of his inaccessible forests.

We sing the deeds of our forefathers that we may emulate their fame, and become in our turn the theme of glowing song.

Rapturous applause greeted this war saga, as it was called by the Franks, calculated in every way to gratify their legitimate pride in the deeds of their forefathers, pursuing to the very last, under a chief they had adored living and revered dead, the vast broken hordes of the 'devastator of nations.' 'Waeshaël' for Aurelian, the soldier poet, was drunk to the sound of much excited shouting.

'Did I not tell you,' said Llantildis with animation to Prince Sigismer, as she leant before the King to speak to him, 'what a treat it would be?'

‘Yes, yes,’ hastily answered her brother, as the tumult was growing somewhat beyond bounds. ‘We must have another song, or all will be confusion. Aurelian, thou hadst best drink Waeshaël to the whole company, or to Attila, or the Eagles, or to some one, whilst I get another to take thy place. Here, valiant skald, take the horn of Attila, it is only half filled,’ he said in a low tone; ‘I know thou carest not for overmuch liquor. But talk away, and drink as if filled to the brim.’

This had the desired effect, and ere Aurelian had finished speaking, a new candidate for the minstrel’s honours replaced him in the seat dedicated to the votaries of Braga,<sup>10</sup> and Chlovis took care to keep it filled till the hour came for retiring.

<sup>10</sup> The god of poetry and song (Mallet, *North. Antiq.*).

## CHAPTER XIII.

### *The Conspirators.*

IN a room, not far removed from the palace at Vienne, four men sat in council. The debate was at times rather stormy, until subdued by the pacifying tones of one of the members who seemed to possess command and influence over the others. This was Gondemar, brother to the murdered Chilperic ; he had been King of Vienne, till his brother, Gundovald, wrested the crown from him, as he would have wrested his life, had he not escaped by a sheer miracle. Gondemar was now at Vienne at the risk of that life, and was naturally anxious to repress any outburst likely to attract notice to the present meeting. It was Hagan, brother-in-law to Chilperic and maternal uncle to the royal novice at Geneva, who broke out into angry invectives. Jealous and suspicious by nature, it was a difficult matter to avoid giving him offence, or persuade him that every one was not seeking his own interest, instead of those of the imprisoned Chlotildis, in the treaty with the Merovingian.

‘That the marriage of thy niece is the first stepping-stone to our ends, we know as well as thou dost,’ said Berthar, in whose house the conclave met, ‘but it is not everything.’

‘We shall not do much with this Gundovald, or curb his ambition, if we are not aided by the power of Chlovis. Would we had forestalled him in his treaty with the Frank !’ returned Hagan. ‘Chlovis thinks himself bound in faith to him.’

‘Was his refusal to treat with us definite, Count Hagan ?’ anxiously inquired Gondemar.

‘Not exactly, I think. But he is a wily counsellor, not to be hampered, especially by his own words, or dragged into aught of which he sees not the end.’

‘Didst thou show him the portrait of the Princess?’ asked Bisinus. ‘I was in hopes he would have ventured all to obtain that royal prize. They rate him impressionable to female beauty.’

‘He admires the Princess, none more; albeit he is not ready to receive her from our hands. My belief is that he will demand her in marriage at once from Gundovald.’

‘Then her doom is sealed,’ observed Gondemar; ‘yet hardly would he dare take her life.’

‘He would, rather than see her under the protection of the man he dreads as much as he hates him. The black veil would be scarce sufficient prison in his eyes. He may not expect the Frank to respect vows of which he understands naught.’

‘Thou mistakest entirely. The convent at Soissons is under the immediate protection of Chlovis, and woe be to him who respects not its sanctuary!’ replied Hagan.

‘It would be most impolitic to slay the Princess,’ observed Berthar. ‘To rise in revenge of so foul a deed would be a righteous act in us, her natural protectors. But he will not take her life. This marriage once proposed to him, he will shroud her youth and beauty for ever beneath the black veil. That she has no reluctance to accept such a fate at his hands, is our worst misfortune.’

‘The Catholic Bishop is on our side, there,’ said Bisinus. ‘But for him she would have “professed,” as they call it, last year. Were the King once alarmed into definite steps, I doubt the power of Avitus to ward off the ceremony much longer.’

‘Would that Chlotildis but knew the truth about this Gundovald. Hadst thou but listened to my counsel, Gondemar,’ said Hagan, ‘thou hadst not stayed me from measures that would have inspired revenge in her breast for the murder of her kin. He makes his very sin the pretext for her seclusion; to expiate those sins which the judgment of God visited on them in an awful fate.’

‘She may not be so ignorant,’ said the Prince, ‘as we deem her. Secrecy as to the author of their death might be the condition of their safety, but he could not enforce silence on Avitus, once he had the children in his hands.’

‘I have certain proof,’ returned Hagan, ‘that he has never infringed his oath, in the last missive Chlotildis sent in answer to my earnest prayer that she would not precipitate an event which would for ever separate her from her friends. Did I know aught of these strange characters they learn to form in these same Catholic convents, I would read you the missive, for it is here.’

‘We must take thy word for it, Count Hagan. I fear none of us have much craft of that kind,’ answered Bisinus. ‘I would she were enlightened on this point. Did she but know what part Gundovald played in that fatal tragedy, she would resist his purpose to bury her alive to the very utmost.’

‘My advice is to trust Avitus,’ rejoined Berthar. ‘Whatever his plans for the Princess, she will not be allowed to take these vows if he does not mean it. Gundovald will find it somewhat difficult to realize his will in a community where every one is governed by the least suggestion of the Archbishop.’

‘If Avitus has agreed to keep Gundovald’s secret,’ replied the Prince, after some deliberation with himself, ‘others have not. Surely we can find some means to enlighten her! Hagan, canst not thou manage it? Thou art her mother’s brother, and hast the right to see her as long as she wears the white veil. Or, there is thy wife; send thy wife. A woman can always find a way to compass her purpose.’

‘I might go twenty times to Geneva, and never see her alone,’ answered Hagan. ‘It may be by an order from Gundovald, fearful I should poison her mind against him; would I had but the chance! Or, it may be a precaution of the prudent Avitus, fearing to bring on some catastrophe were Chlotildis to become acquainted with her uncle’s guilt.’

‘There is thy sister, Friedmunda. Would they use the same precaution against her mother’s sister?’ asked Bisinus.

‘Even so; no one must approach her but whom the Archbishop chooses. Any attempt to see her alone would fail, and would at all times be fraught with the utmost danger to all concerned. This Avitus has some project of marrying her to

the Frank. Were we but certain of this, he might manage it so as we reap the advantage.'

'Why dost thou not ask him?' said Berthar. 'I would, point-blank.'

'And spoil everything by thy rashness. Divulging all our plans, and learning nothing of his in return. He is not the man to betray his designs to any save those of his own counsel, least of all to us. Would he but join with us he would find his influence with Gundovald marvellously increased. Backed by us he might do what he liked with him.'

'Why then is he so impolitic as to stand alone?' asked Gondemar. 'He must know we are both ready and willing to support him.'

'Because we are what he calls Arians,' replied Hagan, with a sneer; 'and he says men who hold such tenets would bring a curse, and not a blessing, on all they undertook.'

'Charitable! to say the least of it,' replied the Prince. 'Bigoted, presumptuous hound! we are better without him. Hagan, see if thou canst induce thy sister Friedmunda to repair to Geneva; she might perchance learn somewhat of their plans. They may relax some little of their precautions with her; her visit being as it were one of mere solicitude.'

'She will go fast enough if she sees fit,' said Hagan, 'without any suggestion of mine. I fear she is not free from the influence of the Archbishop. I will suggest the journey to her. She knows I take a strong interest in the daughter of poor Brunecilda, but I scarcely know how far I may trust her with a message of weight.'

'Thou must see in what mood she is,' observed Bisinus. 'It is but natural thou shouldst desire thy sister's daughter should know what debt of gratitude she really owes this murderer and usurper.'

'See to it, my good Hagan,' said the Prince, rising; 'and let me hear what success thou hast. Thou knowest where to find me. I may not wander beyond these friendly bounds—so much do I owe my brother's love. How the Rhone thunders against these walls!' he continued, as he looked down on the

river. 'Much rain must there have been to force it over its borders this wise, and thunder along its course, bearing down every obstacle.'

'So shall we, like the river,' returned Hagan, 'filled to the brim with acts of injustice and oppression, burst the limits in which Gundovald again seeks to compress us; so thunder along, bearing down every obstacle before us!'

'Be thy words a true omen!' said Gondemar. 'Seek now thy sister—and beware thou of doing mad deeds. Reflect before doing aught that may entangle thy party as well as thyself in utter ruin.'

Though Hagan scoffed at such weak advice, his wife Radegundis perfectly agreed with the Prince, and urged him to act upon it.

'And as for Friedmunda, thy sister,' she said; 'her first step would be to go and tell the Archbishop everything, all she knew, and all she did not know. Dost thou not know that she is a convert, of the Archbishop's, and looks upon him as he were a god upon earth?'

'Has she become a tool in the hands of that ambitious and unscrupulous man?' he asked. 'Poor fool! Albeit I should not grieve an she did tell the Archbishop. Would he knew that we are ready to support him should Gundovald prove too much for him!'

Radegundis was right. No sooner had Hagan left his sister than she hastened to the monastery in which Avitus usually resided when he was at Vienne. It was the morning after the meeting at Count Berthar's house; but early as it was, the good Archbishop was already out, visiting the new schools and hospitals he had lately founded. When at last Friedmunda saw him, she found that her news was no news to him.

'Yet I applaud thy zeal, my daughter, and thy prudent determination not to act in so grave a matter without my counsel, who must be best acquainted with all the facts bearing upon this question. It will please me much thou shouldst depart for Geneva, so as to be near thy sister's daughter at this



crisis in her life. Thou must comfort her, and calm her anxiety under the protracted delay of her profession. Exhort her to have implicit confidence in me, the true servant of our Lord, Who rules our lives and shapes them to whatever end He proposes for us. But for that other matter, the enlightenment of her mind to the true character of her uncle Gundovald, thou knowest my word is pledged; such information may not come from *us*.'

'Far be it from me, holy Father, to dispute aught thou sayest; but my comprehension is at fault to understand why a promise thou hast given should be binding on me, who am a stranger to such a promise. Hagan was most importunate on this point. Thou art not displeased with me that I should press this matter? He said he thought it would be well to raise a spirit of opposition to the plans of the King in the maiden's heart.'

'It would, my daughter; but the raising of that spirit must not come from *us*. I use the word advisedly. When God vouchsafed to thee the grace to enter the fold of the true Church, thou didst become a member of a body united as one over the whole earth, and art more particularly included in that word *us*, as being a member of that partition of the fold over which I have spiritual jurisdiction. Knowing, therefore, from thyself what is required of thee, I may not consent that thou shouldst do that which I have sworn not to do. These are fine-drawn questions of conscience, my daughter, which I can hardly expect thee to understand as yet in their full bearing. I can also feel for thy anxiety concerning thy niece and the success of thy brother's plans. But trust thou implicitly in the all-wise and overruling Power which has already brought to a happy issue events we hardly dared to think of less than six months ago. How soon canst thou make ready, my daughter, to depart for Geneva? I will give thee a letter to the venerable Abbess. She will receive thee as one of the lay members of the community for a time. I know thee well enough to feel that thou art in every way ready to yield her the same obedience as if thou wert one of her flock. Thy ready smile assures

me of that. It may be an advantage thou shouldst be near the royal maiden, though I scarcely see as yet to what effect. If it be the will of God she should learn the author of the disastrous fate which overtook her family, He will provide the means.'

Friedmunda was ready to start on her journey next morning, when she received a message from the Archbishop to say that on further consideration he had himself thought it advisable to join her in her journey, and would be with her soon after she had passed the gate of the city. When Friedmunda had left him the previous evening, further reflection had determined him to accompany her as the best means of preventing all future messages from the conspirators, either to himself or to the illustrious captive at Geneva. He overtook Friedmunda at the appointed place, and was soon far advanced on the road.

It was thus that when Aurelian arrived at Vienne, Avitus was not only no longer there, but had by that time reached his destination. It was as well for the secret mission of Aurelian that the Archbishop was absent when he arrived, else had his lips been sealed for the same reason as those of Friedmunda. It would not be with the consent of Avitus such a revelation should be made to her. He found he would have to act on his own counsel, for to seek the Archbishop in the very scene where his complete disguise was so necessary to the success of the King's romantic design, would be at once to discover himself and to fail miserably in his project. He therefore left Vienne, and proceeded on his journey to Geneva, in the same pilgrim's garb as that in which he had sought Remigius in order to obtain his sanction to his present expedition.

Arrived at his destination, his outward appearance presented as forlorn an aspect as he could well desire. Indeed, he received more than one gift of charity on the road, which he duly placed in his wallet with many thanks muttered in Latin, and prayers for the spiritual welfare of the donor. This confirmed the opinion that he was a holy man, travelling from

place to place in fulfilment of a vow, and more than one offered him a shelter for the night. He was pondering within himself whether he had not better accept one of these numerous offers, and see if by careful questioning he might obtain some information as to his means of access to the Princess.

Before he had come to any decision in the matter, he was joined by two men who appeared genuine foot travellers, wayworn and weary truards.<sup>1</sup> They entered into conversation with him, asking him many questions as to his comings and goings, and where he expected to lodge that night.

‘It was just that question I was pondering, comrade, as thou camest up,’ replied Aurelian. ‘If thou couldst help me to some decision in this matter, it would be a kindness.’

‘Thou hadst best come along with us first. We are going to the convent of our Blessed Lady. There is a dole of bread and meat there every evening, besides a feet washing and means for procuring shelter for the night.’

‘Feet washing!’ repeated Aurelian; ‘that will be a right soothing operation, for I must confess I am somewhat footsore with long travelling. And by whom is this welcome ablution performed?’ he asked calmly, as if he had no interest in the matter.

‘It is easy to see, comrade, thou art an entire stranger in this part of the country. It is known for miles round that this daily work of charity is performed by the novices of that sacred community, and those who would have a sight of the beautiful Eduan Princess confined in those walls, have but to present themselves before the great gate of the convent when the bell tolls. Perhaps a lucky chance may give them the good fortune to be consigned to her charge. It is something to have your feet washed by the delicate and tender hands of a Princess!’

‘Ah, comrade,’ said Aurelian, with inward thankfulness at thus obtaining the very information for which he most wished, ‘and hast thou said an extra prayer to thy patron saint to-day, so as to obtain that lucky chance for thyself?’

<sup>1</sup> Beggars.

‘Not I, in faith; it is all the same to me who washes my feet so long as they are washed. I care more for the food, being hungry from long fasting.’

‘Nay, comrade,’ replied Aurelian, ‘thou needest not wait to satisfy a craving stomach. Some charitable people, moved by some pitying saint, or perhaps in fulfilment of some vow, have given me more food than I can well devour. Eat then; here is both bread and meat, and I can find, I dare say, a trifle to get thee a little milk, or may be wine, if there is such a commodity to be had in this neighbourhood.’

‘Plenty of both,’ replied the beggar, ‘thank the saints; though I have more stomach for the latter beverage,’ he continued, laughing as he spoke. ‘Thanks, comrade,’ he said, as he received the bread and meat and a small coin; ‘the saints restore it to thee when thou art in need. Thou art a right good fellow, and I will do my best, not only to get thee a sight of the Princess, but to have thee, if possible, consigned to her care.’

‘That is a turn I most willingly accept,’ said Aurelian, ‘for as I must pass on, perhaps to-morrow, from hence, if I miss this chance I may not have such another of seeing this wondrous maiden. Wilt thou also have some bread and meat?’ he inquired of the other beggar; ‘for though thy tongue has not asked if I have more to spare, thy looks may well frame the question.’

‘Right glad am I that my looks are so eloquent, or rather, that thou art so skilled in reading them. An if thou art so liberal with thy gifts, thou wilt not have much left for thyself.’

‘I never found that to share my store with a comrade in need diminished my portion, friend. It is always made up to me in some way or other. Thou art right welcome to share the contents of my wallet with me. It is not so scantily furnished but that I can give thee a portion. My pilgrim’s staff and scallop stand me in good stead.’

‘I know thy liberality shall stand thee in good stead with me,’ replied the beggar, to whom he was now handing some of the contents of his wallet. ‘It shall not be our fault if thou

hast not thy feet washed this evening by the loveliest maiden I have ever yet seen.'

Soon after this the bell at the convent began to toll, summoning all who meant to claim the aid of our Lady at Geneva that night. On arriving at the gate, Aurelian found a motley group assembled, waiting till it should be thrown open, and he wondered, as he looked at the number of claimants, whether his two companions would be able to keep their word, and whether, after all, it would not be better to act for himself than trust solely to them.

He had not much time to deliberate on this question, for the gates were thrown back and the mendicants admitted into a court one by one, so that there should be no pushing or struggling to be first. As soon as he was inside this court Aurelian saw a long room before him, with several windows, through which he could see women, in the religious habit, passing to and fro, in busy preparation for the service of the poor. He turned to ask his neighbour which of these was the Eduan Princess, and found his friends the two beggars close beside him, doing their best to keep their promise and push him forwards.

'There,' said the second one to whom he gave the food; 'seest thou that novice carrying a ewer of water, passing now—she with the brown hair parted on her forehead and the long white veil? But draw nearer,' they both said, gradually making their way through the crowd. 'Let us pass, friends,' they said to those near them; 'we are taking this pilgrim to the front, that he may tell the distant lands he will visit how our feet are washed in this Christian community by the hands of Princesses. I can tell thee,' he whispered to a beggar anxious to resist his efforts and to maintain his place, 'he is more likely to give thee out of his own wallet than to take thy share of the dole. An thou wilt let us pass I will speak a good word to him for thee.'

It was in this manner Aurelian's two sturdy companions manœuvred to get him up to the door of the room, so that when it was opened the three were immediately in front of it.

‘Reverend Mother,’ said one of the beggars, knowing that he was speaking to one of the professed Sisters who had charge of the novices, ‘this is a most holy pilgrim, who has travelled many lands, and is come to this place this evening footsore and way-weary. May it please you, of your charity, to give him in charge to the holy maiden who washed my feet two nights ago, that she may minister to him.’

‘That may not be, my son,’ replied the Sister in charge. ‘Thou knowest we never choose among you, but take you as you come. It would create ill-will in all concerned were it otherwise. Enter now, and take the seat appointed to each. If God so wills it thy companion shall have the services he desires, but why thou shouldst choose for him, where all are equally anxious to minister to all tenderly and with care, is much marvel to me.’

Aurelian had profited by the delay caused by this parley to look around him for the novice pointed out to him by his companion. He knew her again directly, from her likeness to the portrait Chlovis had received from her uncle Hagan, and which he had shown him again and again, that he might know her at once. There was no mistaking the pure oval face, the bright golden brown hair, the lithe figure full of grace and majesty and womanly modesty. She was standing some way up the room, near a chair, placed somewhat in the background near a corner, where stood a foot-tub and ewer of water. She held a towel in her hand, and appeared to be waiting for some claimant on her charitable ministrations.

Before any one was aware of his intention, Aurelian deliberately walked up the room and sat himself down on the chair appointed as her station. A Sister in a black veil, superintending the feet washing, would have stopped him, but that the Princess was already on her knees before him.

‘Thou must be a great stranger to our rules so boldly to step out of thy place, my son,’ said the superintending nun. ‘But that thou seemest a holy man by thy garb, thy conduct would meet with the reproof it merits. As thou art, no doubt, ignorant of these things, the Sister Chlotildis shall wash thy

feet this evening, but if thou returnest here let not such unmannerly pushing forward be renewed, or thou must be marked for exclusion. There is neither first nor last here, but we all humbly take the place appointed us.'

Thus assured that the novice now kneeling before him was indeed the very person he sought, Aurelian who had meant to answer all attempts to dislodge him from the place he had so successfully obtained, by assuming an ignorance of the language in which he was addressed, looked down with emotion on her who, if all things prospered, would be his future Queen, the chosen one of God, the foundation stone of the great kingdom He was raising to His honour and glory amongst the nations. Her face was bowed as she occupied herself in the preparation necessary to the feet washing she proposed. Aurelian looked down the long room now filled with busy kneeling novices, each before her charge, the professed Sisters passing to and fro, bringing things needed or keeping order.

Seeing that the general attention was fully occupied, the novices listening as they deftly and tenderly performed their charitable duties, to the long stories of the woes and misfortunes of their respective charges, he dropped into the foot-tub, into which the Princess was now pouring the water, a massive gold ring,<sup>2</sup> which he had received from Chlovis as a token to her. This action surprised and alarmed her. She looked up like a frightened fawn into the face bending down towards her, but observing nothing but the greatest respect in the expression of the man who had committed so strange an action, and a friendly but earnest look in his eyes, she stooped down, and taking the ring out of the water, surveyed it with increasing amazement.

In that short moment, Aurelian had seen upturned to his the loveliest and purest face on which he had ever looked. Virginal grace was blended with the freshest beauty, and the depth and splendour of her dark violet eyes, veiled with long silken lashes, revealed the fervour of the spirit looking out from behind them. The shining hair parted on her pure and candid

<sup>2</sup> Mengel, *History of Germany*.

forehead, gave a glory to her face. Rising to her feet in her surprise, her tall and slender figure, robed in black, swayed to and fro with the elegance of a young poplar.

'I pray you, most gracious virgin, of your charity,' said Aurelian to her in the Latin tongue, 'that you would be pleased to resume the lowly position that you have just quitted. I would have speech of you. This ring is voucher to you that I come not here without high authority, nor without an earnest purpose. I pray you, vouchsafe a gracious ear to my tale. It savours not of harm to yourself, but of the deep devotion of a great King to your cause.'

'Say on,' answered the Princess, resuming her kneeling position, her first alarm somewhat allayed by this respectful address.

'Great Princess,' continued Aurelian, regardless of the gesture with which she deprecated this title, 'the great King and valiant warrior, Chlovis the Merovingian, knowing how unjustly you are detained in captivity by your uncle Gundovald, the murderer of your father and all your family, bids me offer to you the services of his sword and arm to rescue you from an unjust prison and restore you to your rightful position. He bids me ask you to be his wife, his Queen, to let him protect you with his valour, and share with you his throne.'

'Murderer of my father! unjust prison!' repeated the amazed Princess, in answer to the startling speech which Aurelian had so rapidly poured out. He well knew that he had not much time in which to deliver his errand. 'Now, indeed, thou speakest parables; thou, whom I would call audacious stranger but for the earnestness of thy voice and thy friendly manner.'

'Do you not know, gracious Princess,' he said, 'that your father, mother, brothers, were most inhumanly put to the sword by your uncle Gundovald; yourself and sister placed here, saved from the same awful fate by the holy Avitus, after much entreaty and fervent prayer for your lives?'

The Princess looked in pale affright on the face of the man who announced these horrors to her in such low measured tones, gazed at him fixedly for a moment, and then fell speechless to



the ground. In an instant all was commotion in the room, but Aurelian, nothing moved, kept his seat, awaiting the course of events. Two or three attendants passed through the rows of kneeling novices, followed by the superintendent. Her amazement was complete when she recognized the pilgrim she had reproved as the person near whom the catastrophe had occurred, and who in all probability was the cause of it. Their first care was to raise and remove the fainting Princess, and when the superintending Sister had seen this important business properly carried out, she addressed herself to the man, who sat with so much composure on the seat he had so rudely taken. All upon which Aurelian seemed now intent was, not to escape as any one with less important moving cause would have done in similar circumstances, but to court inquiry, and to secure a farther interview with the Princess, whose interest he had so rudely awakened.

‘I pray you, reverend Mother,’ he said, addressing her in the Latin tongue common to all Catholics, chiefly Roman by birth or naturalization; ‘if you think I am to blame in this matter have me conveyed from this into some place and before some person authorized to hear my explanation of this untoward event. I would also fain have speech of the gracious Princess again, to crave her forgiveness of my too great precipitancy.’

‘See the Princess again,’ gasped out the Sister Superintendent, almost speechless with the audacity of such a request. ‘Thou shalt not see her again, I promise thee; but some one else shall see thee and require an atonement for thy strange behaviour in this room to-night. The holy Avitus shall hear of thy proceedings. May our most Blessed Lady be for ever praised that the venerable Archbishop is just now within the walls of this her sacred refuge!’

‘Now for ever praised be the most high God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ answered Aurelian, devoutly crossing himself as he uttered this formula, distinctive of the Catholic at a time when Arianism was so rife. ‘I ask for nothing better than to be brought into the presence of that holy man of God. When he looks upon me he will see no stranger to him.’

‘Who art thou, thou strange man?’ the Sister asked, more and more amazed at his words. ‘But come, since thou desirest to see the holy Avitus, to him shalt thou be led. Sister Euphrasia, give orders for the distribution of the dole, the hall to be cleared and the gates locked. I will lead this bold man into the presence of the venerable Archbishop, since he challenges his judgment of his actions. Follow me!’ she said to Aurelian, as she went out by a door opposite to that by which he entered, leaving the spectators of this scene in the greater consternation, that many of those lower down the room scarcely understood what had happened, so quickly had it all passed.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### *The Princess Chlotildis.*

THE account of the astounding event had been carried to the Mother Abbess Pancratia, who ruled the house of our Lady at Geneva. Extreme terror for the Princess seized her. Fully aware of every circumstance which rendered the position of the royal virgin one of the utmost peril, she trembled for the fate of one she loved with the tender affection of a mother for her daughter. Would it be possible to persuade the stern King that it was the result of a mere accident, and not a preconcerted scheme? Would not the same fate at his hands overtake her which had been meted out by him to her unfortunate parents? The first words the Princess had uttered when she awoke from her swoon had told the Abbess that the awful truth had been revealed to her. She hastened to despatch a messenger in all haste for the Archbishop, who then, fortunately for all concerned, was within the walls of the convent. The Prelate was deep in the congenial occupation of inditing an epistle to Remigius, informing him of the increasing energy of the party against the King, little dreaming that at that very moment the means of which he had spoken to the Countess Friedmunda had already arrived. So urgent was the message which summoned him, that he rose directly and followed its bearer to the room, where the royal virgin, scarcely recovered from her swoon, still lay in the supporting arms of her aunt Friedmunda.

‘It is a temptation of the Evil One,’ she said, ‘to allure my thoughts from the holy meditations which, performed unworthily, will unfit me to pronounce those blessed vows, and devote my life to that holy purpose of expiation which will

deliver my parents from the penalty of their sins. He said they were murdered; he offered me the sword of a great King to avenge them, to deliver me from this prison! Oh, say, most venerable Mother, what does it mean? This is not a prison—but a blessed refuge, a heavenly home!’

Friedmunda looked with terror in her eyes at the Abbess. Both anxiously turned to the door, listening for the footsteps of one who could alone guide them at so terrible a crisis.

‘Calm yourself, my dearest daughter,’ said the Abbess; ‘try and collect your thoughts, scattered by a passing accident. You may have been a prey to the swimming of the senses only, an illusion, a passing dream.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said her aunt, pressing her close to her sheltering bosom, and wiping her clammy forehead; ‘it must have been a dream.’

‘This is no dream!’ said the Princess, as she held up the ring. ‘And now I remember he said it was Chlovis who sent it to me—Chlovis the Merovingian, a great King, a valiant warrior! Who is Chlovis, dearest Mother? and what is he to me?’

The Abbess was fortunately spared any answer to this very embarrassing question. The Archbishop Avitus entered the room at that moment. As soon as the Princess perceived him, she rose from her reclining posture, and crossing her arms on her bosom, stood with head meekly bowed before him.

‘This is no common chance,’ he said, when he had heard all the details of this strange event. ‘My first step must be to question the person who brought a message armed with such high authority. I will go and see him, and thou, my daughter, put thy trust where thou knowest it can only be firmly fixed.’

‘Is my daughter Chlotildis to keep the ring, venerable Father?’ asked the Abbess.

‘I shall be better able to answer thee when I have spoken with this messenger. Retain it in thy possession, my daughter, for the present. It is a valuable token, and one which seems to vouch for the weight of the message.’

When the Archbishop entered the room where Aurelian awaited him, this last threw back the cowl concealing his features, and advancing to meet him, knelt down to ask his blessing.

‘How—my son!’ exclaimed the venerable Prelate, in deep amazement. ‘Then it is true—the message is of God! But how is it that Remigius did not warn me of thy coming?’

‘I was the bearer, venerable Father, of a missive. The scroll is here in this purse,’ answered Aurelian, opening a pouch he wore at his girdle. ‘Thou hadst already left Vienne when I reached that city. I followed thee here, scarcely knowing how to carry out the King’s designs, when the merest chance offered me the opportunity.’

‘I recognize in this the planning of a higher wisdom than can ever be the so-called wisdom of mortal man. Had I been at Vienne, my oath to this King would have obliged me to frustrate thine errand. It is for some wise purpose it has been permitted thee to carry it out. My journey hither, which I believed the result of a wise prudence, was only in obedience to a premeditated design to forward the accomplishment of this.’

‘May I not speak to the illustrious Princess again, holy Father?’ pleaded Aurelian. ‘I must carry back some message from her lips to the King.’

‘I will give thee a message, my son. I dare not permit thee, knowing for what purpose thou art here, to see her again. Hie thee back rather at thy utmost speed! If the Eduan King gets wind of this affair, I would scarce answer for the life of the royal virgin. Tell thy King from me, boldly and before all to demand her in marriage. Let him send such an embassy as shall awe Gundovald into compliance, and let him be prepared for instant rescue of the Princess if his demand be refused. There is, as thou doubtless knowest, a strong party in the very centre of the Eduan Court desirous of this marriage, and ready to support the claims of the Merovingian, sufficiently powerful, in the last extremity, to protect her from violence. I would rather he should not be obliged to have recourse to

their aid. It might afterwards entangle him in schemes of ambition and party interest with men of the most unscrupulous nature.'

'You may depend on my speed, venerable Father, spurred on by a message of such urging. Unfortunately, I have left my best horse at Lyons. It was a sorry beast I rode into Vienne, and that I left more than twelve miles from this.'

'I can find thee a horse, my son. Thou mayest not return the way thou camest. Speed across the country to Besançon, from thence to Langres and Troyes. I will give thee letters which thou wilt deliver to persons in these towns, who will give thee their best aid.'

'One boon more! I pray thee tell me, if it put not your oath in peril, does the Princess keep the ring?'

'Yes, my son; and she will know, from the permission I gave her to retain it, that thy message is a true message. I told her that would be the sign that thy mission was not unauthorized.'

The Archbishop Avitus returned to the room, where the Princess and her aunt still awaited his coming. The Abbess Pancratia had been summoned to attend the coming services in the chapel, from whence, even then, arose the sound of chant and hymn. The Countess Friedmunda was still with her niece.

'Thou must keep the ring, my daughter,' he said to the Princess. 'The day may come when it will be in thy power to return it to him who sent it.'

'Holy Father,' pleaded Friedmunda; 'thou knowest my anxious love for the daughter of my sister. May I not be allowed to see this pilgrim, and ask him more concerning his message?'

'I have learnt all that is needful or good for us to know. Besides, this pilgrim, as thou callest him, is already on his way back to him who sent him. Thou must arm thyself with patience, my daughter,' he said, turning to the pale novice, 'and a constant fortitude. A great crisis has arrived in thy life, not unforeseen by those who have thy dearest interest at heart.'

The Princess clasped her hands with joy. She thought that Avitus spoke of the long desired hour in which she might devote herself to a life of sacred seclusion. For that passing moment she had forgotten all that had taken place, the ring, even the words which Aurelian had spoken to her. Then the sudden remembrance came back to her, and a despair as sudden, a terror of she knew not what, seized her, and sinking on her knee, as her face grew as pale as her veil, 'O holy Father !' she exclaimed, 'shall I not be permitted to consecrate my life to God ?'

'My daughter, courage ! Thou shalt be permitted, no doubt, to devote thy life to the service of God ; whether it be exactly in the manner thou dost propose to thyself or not. Canst thou doubt for an instant that all is arranged by Him Who orders all our ways for us ?'

'Oh, say not, holy Father, that it will cause me to leave these sheltering walls, where is peace and happiness, and the loving affection of one who has been to me more than a mother. Say not, holy Father, it will send me into the world I know not, full of snares, deceit, and trouble !'

'I may not tell thee now. Indeed I know not, as yet, how it will be accomplished. But canst thou doubt His power to shelter those who love Him, in the midst of the greatest peril, and deliver them from deceitful snares ? His love is more than the love of a mother, and what He asks of thee He will give strength to thee, if thou ask it, to accomplish as He demands. Lose not thyself in vain imaginings, my daughter, but cast thyself at His feet, and say, with the Blessed Mother of our Divine Master, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done unto me according to Thy word."'

The fervent manner of the Prelate, the memory he had evoked of a sublime self-yielding to a destiny she could not understand, yet accepted as coming from God, inspired the breast of the royal virgin with the like feeling of humility and resignation. She rose to her feet, and bending before the crucifix, at the upper end of the room, stood in mute

and lowly self-surrender before it. The thoughts of Avitus involuntarily reverted to one who, scarce five centuries before, thus bowed herself before the divine mandate, and was hailed by the angelic messenger, as 'blessed amongst women.'

Then rose from the near chapel a single voice of surpassing clearness and sweetness, singing the opening verse of the anthem for that evening—

*'Beati omnes qui ambulant in via Domini,*

*'Corona justitiæ pacisque valde magnæ coronabit eos.'*

Avitus returned to Vienne, leaving Friedmunda with her niece. He had not been there long before the spoil of the Alemanni entered the gates of the city. King Gundovald uttered a fierce and bitter exclamation as Avitus, hastily summoned, read to him the letter brought by the usual messenger of Remigius. The louder rose the shouts of the multitude at sight of this royal token of the munificence of the Franks and their great leader, the darker grew the brow of the Eduan King.

'He beards me to my face. Even in the very heart of my kingdom he sues for the favour of the ever-shifting populace. Who shall say what purpose he masks with this ostentatious gift? How can a Frank robber afford to give up the legitimate prey of his freebooting, unless to forward some scheme best known to himself?'

'Does it not seem rather a desire to obtain thy royal favour, lord King,' said Gontran, the intendant of finance, who, with the rest of the household officers, had hastened to obey the royal summons. 'He means it, to my poor seeming, as a tribute to thy power, the token of an ample vengeance on the enemy who ravaged so fair a portion of thy kingdom.'

'And thou too, Gontran,' said the King; 'art thou also dazzled with the outside splendour of a gift, or compensation, or whatever else he chooses to call it, and seest not the insidious advantage he derives from it?'

'No, frankly, lord King, I do not. But for thy goodwill in framing this treaty of alliance with him, he would not have had the chance of such a booty. Is it not rather a



thankoffering to thee for accepting his services, than a mask to any sinister or ambitious design? What would he gain by a surrender of booty as valuable to him as to thyself? It will more than make up for the loss the salt curers sustained.'

'What will he gain, Gontran? The favourable opinion of such men as thou,' replied the King; 'of all who see no further than the plausible surface. He will gain the goodwill of the people, ever ready to be taken by outside glitter, and when his purpose does come out, the voices of those who would oppose his ambitious schemes will be drowned in the voice of public opinion, clamouring in his favour. What say you, my lord Archbishop? This comes marvellous soon after that strange incident at Geneva, of which I have never yet rightly heard the real import.'

'My lord King,' replied Avitus, 'if thy experience of men lead thee to attribute other motives to this Merovingian than those contained in the missive I have just read, thou canst hardly expect others to see it at once in the same light.'

'I know not, lord Archbishop,' replied the Eduan King, 'but it seems to me that an adventurer who had the audacity to aspire to an alliance for his sister with the heir of Burgundy, may be well supposed capable of other views equally extravagant. I have heard,' he continued, looking round the circle of his nobles gathered there, 'somewhat of plans concerning the daughter of that traitor Chilperic. Let me tell those who entertain such, that they consult her best interests when they entirely forget her existence.'

The brow of Count Hagan, standing in the rear of those around the King, darkened with a frown. He laid his hand on the hilt of his sword at the word traitor, as applied to his friend by his murderer. But he curbed his anger, anxious to hear what would come next from the lips of a man considered by himself and his party as a bloodthirsty tyrant.

'I will put an effectual bar to all speculations of that kind henceforth,' said the King. My lord Archbishop, I give thee three days for thy departure to Geneva, and three more to make ready the ceremony of the profession of the novice,' he

continued, with emphasis, 'too long delayed for reasons as puerile as they are vexatious. At the expiration of that time I myself will be there to witness an act which will put her for ever beyond the designs of scheming men.'

There was no mistaking the King's intentions this time. Count Hagan withdrew to concert with his friends instant measures to frustrate such a determination, or delay it till they could obtain the aid of Chlovis in this extremity. In vain the Count strove to obtain an audience of the good Archbishop. The Archbishop steadfastly refused to see him, still less to listen to any advances emanating from such a quarter, determined as he was to obey the mandate of the King, trusting implicitly to a Hand which no human means could stay to bring to pass the things ordained by the Divine Omniscience.

Before the three days allotted for the departure of the Archbishop had expired, Aurelian the Gaul rode into Vienne with a brilliant embassy. At the head of the procession rode the Lord Bibrax, his white wand of office in his hand, then Aurelian and Chilperic the Merovingian, bareheaded, as was also the Antrusion and the Lord Auberon, as well as their followers, their helmets at their saddle-bows, the hilts of their swords muffled, to indicate their peaceful intentions. The populace shouted, as it always does shout when any extraordinary show passes before its eyes—shouts which redoubled as the beautiful horse went past, fully equipped for war, and loaded with sword, spear, and shield, the suitable wedding present from a valiant warrior to his bride. Two grooms were leading it, barely able to restrain its ardour, further excited by the noise around it.

It was not till the next morning that the King of Burgundy yielded to the entreaties of his counsellors, and consented to receive an embassy of which he but too well guessed the purport. As there had been no contrary message of any kind, or counter orders to those the Archbishop had received from the King, he felt himself constrained to depart, lest any unadvised act of his own or others should precipitate the fate of the Princess. He had scarcely proceeded a mile from the city when one of

his attendants came up to him, where he rode on a mule in the midst of his train, reporting that two or three horsemen were fast advancing on the road behind them. Even this information did not arrest his progress. 'If they are in such haste,' he said, 'and their message be for us, they will overtake us.'

In the space of a few minutes the horsemen came up with them. 'Where is the lord Archbishop?' they cried. The Counts Hagan, Berthar, and Bisinus were there, all three imploring the Archbishop to delay his journey till at least the decision concerning the embassy of Chlovis were known. On the steady and persistent refusal of Avitus to take any orders but from the King, Hagan drew his sword, and would have proceeded to violence had he not been restrained by his wiser companions.

'Proud, overbearing priest,' he exclaimed, as he thrust back his sword into its sheath, 'but for this restraint I would have put an end to thy ambitious schemes for ever! Base panderer to a vile tyrant! whose plots against my murdered sister's child thou only abettest that thou mayest warp him the easier to thine own purposes.'

'You had best remove him if you possibly can,' said Avitus to the two other lords with him. 'All I can tell you is this. One false step on your part will bring down certain ruin on the head of her whom you strive in vain to protect.'

Impressed by the serious warning conveyed in the looks and tones of the Prelate, far more than even in his words, Berthar and Bisinus used their best persuasions to induce Hagan to go back with them at once.

'Believe me, it is of the utmost importance that you should keep yourselves entirely in the background, whilst other influences are brought to bear in this matter,' said the Archbishop to Hagan.

'Prayers to your blessed Saints and Virgins, no doubt,' retorted Hagan, contemptuously; 'effective arms those are to oppose the wiles of an unscrupulous murderer!'

'Blaspheme not that of which thou knowest naught, impious man,' said Avitus, in calm and grave rebuke. 'At

least, if thou hast not been found worthy of the divine grace enabling thee to hold with the teaching of the Catholic Church, insult her not in the presence of her servants, lowly and unworthy though they be. Such is not the act of a man who has faith in his own creed, however full of error it may be.'

After this interruption, the train of the Archbishop proceeded on its road, the disappointed Hagan and his companions spurring back to Vienne. As they struck off into a bye path they did not meet another messenger, speeding also after the retiring train of the Catholic Prelate. As soon as this new messenger reached the Archbishop, he pulled a scroll from the folds of his tunic, and presented it.

'From the Lord Aurelian, consecrated Father,' he said, respectfully; 'but for the orders of this Eduan King, that we should not be allowed to pass the bounds of our quarters last night, thou wouldst have had it yesterday, soon after we entered the city. I gave our guard the slip as they escorted our embassy to the palace, where it is even now. I am sorry I shall miss the sight there must be there. They say the Eduan rages like a wild boar at bay. It must be rare sport!'

As this message was delivered in the Frankish tongue, the followers of the Archbishop looked at each other inquiringly.

'Thou a Frank,' said the Archbishop, as he took the scroll, 'and without thy sword and helmet!'

'Thou mayest well marvel, consecrated Father. It is the first time, I trow, since I doffed either, and strange enough I feel without them. Perchance they deemed it best, to enable us to keep the peace, to deprive us of the means of breaking it.'

'Another messenger, holy Father,' said one of the attendants, coming up.

'Take a place amongst my followers, my son,' said the Archbishop; 'I would not thy goodwill in this matter should bring thee to harm. Give him a frock and cowl quickly, for safer protection. It might injure the cause of the Lord Aurelian,' he said to himself, 'that one of his followers should be found in parley with me.'

Athanaric, for it was he, followed the directions of Avitus, thinking it fine sport to be riding post in a new country on strange errands, and hiding, like a hare, among cowls and frocks ; himself, too, enwrapped in the strange unwonted garb. This time it was a messenger from the King Gundovald. Finding, after all, that the Archbishop was his best and most disinterested counsellor, dreading, moreover, a rise among the people, urged thereto by the furious Hagan, he had sent for Avitus, thinking that he had not yet left Vienne. When his messenger returned with the news that he had left for Geneva, the King's orders were urgent that he should be overtaken and earnestly prayed to return. In his perplexity the King, urged on one side, threatened on the other, with no one on whose counsel he could really fall back, was ready to place the greater reliance on a man whose advice had hitherto proved of so much value to him.

Avitus gave the orders to return to Vienne, much comforted by the assurance Aurelian's scroll had given him that a large body of armed Franks were hovering in the neighbourhood of Geneva, though they were sworn, under penalty of death, not to act except upon his order. Glad to find the protection of the strong arm of Chlovis so near the Princess, the Archbishop rode into Vienne with a heart somewhat lighter than when he left it in the morning.

An hour later the King, alone with him in his inner council room, gave him to read the terms of this new alliance as drawn up by the Archbishop of Rheims.

'They are favourable enough in their seeming,' said the King, 'if this same Frank but hold them binding. Whether he will not seize the first occasion to infringe this treaty and invade my territories is a question deserving consideration.'

'I can answer for the good faith of the Merovingian, my lord King. I have it from the hand of my venerable brother Remigius, that he desires above all things to keep himself entirely aloof from those men seeking but their own ends under colour of another interest. He has had overtures from them which he has absolutely rejected.'

‘Thou knowest, it seems to me, more of this than myself, lord Archbishop,’ rejoined the King, in a sterner manner than was usual to him in his conferences with the holy Avitus. ‘What warrant have I that this is not a conspiracy on all sides to work me evil?’

‘Thou canst think it if it please thee better,’ answered the holy man, nothing moved. ‘Thou seekest friendly counsel from me, and I give thee what seems best to my poor judgment. Trust to the Frank. Believe me, I know him generous, even magnanimous. He is politic and sagacious enough to know that his best interests lie not in dark combinations with unruly and ambitious conspirators. Anxious to cultivate peace so that he may promote plenty in the desolate parts of Gaul, where he is now established, he finds it best to be on terms of amity with thee, his near neighbour and ally. It is at thy choice what relations exist between you. As for this matter of the royal virgin, who owes her life to thy clemency, is it not better she should be under the protection of a valiant warrior, thy friend, than remain here, in the midst of men ever ready to make her name the watchword of their party? What peace will there be with her still at Geneva, professed or not? What are vows of eternal seclusion to men who set at naught the religion which sanctions and receives them? Would it be the first time a spouse of Christ has been torn from His sanctuary by violent men and consigned to the arms of some man equally violent, if it suited best to forward their evil purposes?’

‘There are means,’ said the King, in a menacing tone, ‘of rendering such deeds impracticable.’

‘Means, which for the sake of thy safety thou dardest not employ, lord King. Such a ruthless deed would excite universal horror against thee, and be the very signal of thine own downfall. Thou art too sagacious, of too keen a foresight, not to feel certain in thine own mind, that to resort to such means would be madness.’

‘And what about her great desire to take these vows and devote herself to the seclusion they impose? Or, hast thou, my lord Archbishop, contrived to alter her views on that subject?’

‘Thou art hard pressed, lord King, and in grievous strait, else would I remain no longer in council with one who mistrusts my plighted faith, and doubts the uprightness of my actions. But I marvel not, a rule maintained by violence and bloodshed inspires suspicion easily roused. See the royal virgin thyself, question her as to her present intentions; if thou findest them no longer the same as they were, question her as to the means by which they have been altered. I challenge thee boldly to this proof of my good faith. And that thou mayest be certain I hold no communication with her, order my arrest and safe keeping until thy return from Geneva.’

‘I will not offer thee such an indignity,’ replied the King. ‘I will see this girl, and ascertain in what mood she is. Wouldst thou accompany me to Geneva it would be a token of thy charitable forgetting of my churlish reception of thy friendly counsel. Thou knowest my grievous perplexity.’

‘It were better for thy purpose, lord King, were such an interview effected without my presence or that of any one thought to have spiritual influence over her. I owe thee no forgiveness, for thou hast done me no wrong. Believe only in my good faith towards thee. Believe also, that, willing or not to give up the fulfilment of her wishes, to bestow the royal virgin on the Merovingian King, is the course of action best suited to consolidate thy power and bind a faithful ally to thy side.’

‘I will see her before I determine any course of action,’ said the King. ‘This same Aurelian will I take with me. He shall hear her determination from her own lips, and bear her answer back to his King.’

‘That is not a bad proposal,’ returned the Archbishop, rejoiced to think the head and arm of such a man as Aurelian should be near the Princess should any sudden emergency arise in this interview.

## CHAPTER XV.

### *The Espousals at Geneva.*

WHEN the Count Hagan and his compeers heard of the impending interview at Geneva, they asserted their right to be present, especially when they heard the Archbishop would not be there. The aspect of the King alone, they said, would terrify the Princess into compliance with his will, brought up as she had been from her infancy in the solitude of a convent, and trained to seek direction from the will of others.

A stormy discussion ended at last in the compromise that the Counts Berthar and Bisinus should be present, as being more amenable to reason. Furious at his exclusion, Count Hagan swore that no one should prevent his instant departure for Geneva, as he had as much right to be near his sister's child at such a crisis in her life. High words again arose, and but for Hagan's precipitate retreat he would have been arrested on the spot, an event which would have greatly promoted the freedom of Gundovald's actions. Fortunately for the prospects of the accomplishment of the proposed alliance, so thought his party, he escaped, and mounting his horse, rode off towards the Geneva road.

'Let him go,' said the King; 'he cannot do much harm. If he even gain admittance into the convent, he will yet not be permitted to see her whom he seeks, and inspire her with his rebellious feelings. It is her unbiassed wish and desire to be a nun. If I find it is no longer the same, far be it from me to coerce her in the decision of her own future.'

When Aurelian heard these words, he was thankful that he had been able to carry out the romantic scheme devised by



Chlovis. The new view of her position which he had been enabled to implant in the mind of the royal novice must have effected some change in her ideas unfavourable to Gundovald, and perchance had induced her to ponder seriously on the protection offered to her by the Merovingian. He hailed the approaching interview with confidence, and prepared to accompany the King in all gladness of heart.

The Count Hagan arrived first, and presenting himself at the gate of the convent, he imperiously demanded admission. It could not be denied him so far ; but once inside the gate, he was restricted, as were all who had no farther right of entrance, to the common hall, beyond whose limits few could pass. The first person he asked for was his sister Friedmunda, but she, alarmed at his presence at such a time and in such a place, took counsel of the Abbess Pancratia, and sent him word that the regulations of the convent would not admit of her seeing him. The Abbess, who delivered this message to the Count, learnt with increasing terror that the King was approaching, in company with the ambassador who was seeking the hand of the royal novice for Chlovis. Count Hagan warned the Abbess against using any undue influence with the royal virgin, threatening that were she not forthwith delivered to the Lord Aurelian, he would set fire to the convent and burn all it contained. His threat was no vain pretence. The Abbess well knew he was quite capable of carrying it out to its full extent. Nor would such an action have been without its precedent, as she well knew to her terror. She also heard with much dismay that the Archbishop was not with the King, and that she would be compelled to act on her own responsibility.

The Princess was not alarmed when she heard of the approach of Gundovald. The words of Aurelian appeared to her, the more she reflected on them, as a divine message sent to prepare her for some coming change, as yet undefined to her comprehension, and she awaited the result of the impending interview with a reliance all the more implicit that it was high placed.

Yet she could not shake off a feeling of horror when she found herself in the presence of a man whom the unknown messenger had denounced as the murderer of her parents. She did not droop before him; she felt strangely nerved, with a strength she knew could not be her own. It was hardly to be expected she should recognize in the man who stood beside the King, in resplendent armour, the travel-soiled pilgrim who had brought her a message so full of eventful meaning. As she lifted her eyes to the countenance of her uncle Gundovald, she caught sight of this stranger's face in a hurried glance, and a new-born confidence stole into her heart as she saw the friendly smile on his lips, the expression of his eyes, which, she knew not why, was not altogether unfamiliar to her. Although a strange conflict of feeling was taking place within her, she stood listening with quiet composure to the questions the King now addressed to her.

'No, my lord!' she firmly answered, to the amazement of the King; 'my wishes are no longer what they were.' The very fact of his presence, and of his questions, intuitively conveyed to her mind how hostile was his disposition towards herself. She felt also as if there were a design on his part to thwart some project, perhaps this very marriage, which she could not but suspect was favoured by Avitus, if for no other reason than his having permitted her to keep the ring. This determined her in her course of action. She felt certain she could not be wrong when acting up to the wishes of the man whom she most revered and trusted.

'Not the same,' echoed the King. 'What has happened in your secluded life to effect such a change?'

'This, my lord,' she replied, drawing from the folds of her dress, as she spoke, the ring Chlovis had sent her, suspended from the black ribbon she wore round her neck.

'A ring! What is this? Whose ring?' he demanded, sternly, trying at the same time to obtain possession of it; an attempt she at once, firmly but respectfully, resisted.

'It is the ring of Chlovis the Merovingian,' she replied; 'a valiant warrior and great King,' she continued, repeating

the very words Aurelian had used, 'who has laid his sword and service at my feet to rescue me from unjust captivity, and whose protection I now invoke to take me out of the hands of my father's murderer.'

'Treason!' shouted the King. 'And these are the infamous wiles of those whose word was pledged to me—this the faith of a Catholic priest!'

'No treason, my lord; least of all of the holy Avitus, who refused my most earnest prayer to explain to me words so new and strange,' she replied, with a firmness and dignity which surprised even Aurelian, and filled all who heard her with admiration and sympathy—all except the King, who was well nigh overwhelmed with consternation, born partly of an accusing conscience, partly of a feeling he could not define, as if some supernatural interference had been at work to bring about events in a manner so wholly incomprehensible to him.

'It was a pilgrim, whose feet I would have washed,' continued the Princess, 'who gave me this ring and spoke these words to me. Who he was I cannot say, for I only saw him for a moment, and never since.'

'It is a mere trick,' exclaimed the King, beside himself with fury and disappointment; 'an invention to frustrate my plans for your future. Those plans shall be carried out, in spite of you all,' he continued; 'of all concerned in this conspiracy.'

'My lord King,' interposed Aurelian, 'you promised me that, if this illustrious Princess were no longer willing to fulfil your wishes, you would yield to my demand of her in marriage for my lord and King, Chlovis the Merovingian.'

At the sound of his voice the royal virgin looked in his face. The manner in which he had emphasized those concluding words, rapidly brought conviction to her mind that she again heard the pilgrim speaking. She looked beseechingly at him, as if appealing to the protection of the man she now recognized as the bearer of that message which had so strangely penetrated all obstacles to reach her. Aurelian's smile in response to her mute appeal conveyed to her the welcome assurance that she was already, by his presence, under the

protection she had invoked, and free henceforth from oppression or restraint of any kind.

'She shall not leave these walls!' said the King. 'Her vow to devote herself to eternal seclusion is upon her. She may not break it without sacrilege, without incurring the wrath of God, certain to overtake her for such a crime.'

The face of the Princess turned deadly pale as she listened to these words. Aurelian saw her change countenance, and hastened to reassure her, saying to the King—

'My lord King, I am a Catholic, and I can tell this illustrious Princess, that he who received her vow can also release her from it.'

'I can assure these noblemen here present, and the King's Highness,' now said the Abbess Pancratia, 'that there has been no vow on the part of this royal virgin to devote herself to the service of God in the holy seclusion of this house, but only an ardent desire, often expressed, to be permitted so to devote herself when of the required age.'

'That makes no difference,' fiercely retorted the King.

'I do not agree with your Highness,' said Aurelian. 'I appeal to the holy Avitus to confirm the truth of this statement, or to release her from a vow which she was inclined to make under false representations.'

'She must not be coerced, lord King,' said in a breath the Counts Bisinus and Berthar, present according to agreement at the interview; 'your royal word is pledged, your honour is at stake.'

'She shall not be coerced, lord King!' exclaimed Count Hagan, bursting into the room, the sword in his hand which he had drawn on those who would have opposed his admission. 'She shall be given in marriage to the Merovingian. Much need is there of his valiance to protect her from thy tyranny.'

'Stay, my lords!' implored the Princess; 'sheathe, I pray you, those bared swords,' the King having drawn his on the entrance of Hagan. 'Cease this dreadful contention, so unseemly in these walls dedicated to the peace of God. I am willing to abide by the decision of the holy Avitus in this

matter. If he says that it is my duty to return this ring to the valiant warrior, moved with pity of my desolate state, then I shall pray this noble lord,' she continued, turning with an action full of grace towards Aurelian, 'to bear it back to him, with the assurance of my eternal gratitude for his goodwill towards me, and that his name shall be never absent from my prayers. If, on the contrary, he should tell me that God has called me to be the spouse of this great King, I shall claim it as my right to be permitted to depart with his envoy; and I think I have heard and seen enough in this interview to assure me that I shall not want for resolute men to make good my claim to common justice. Dearest Mother, with your permission, I would now retire. Bear me up, sister of my mother, with your supporting arm. This conflict has been almost more than my strength.'

With these words the Princess left the room, supported on either side by the Abbess and the Countess Friedmunda, leaving the King and nobles surprised into silence by her sudden departure, and the resolution and authority of her manner. Aurelian did not know which to praise most to himself—the dignity with which she asserted her claims to rights common to all, so marvellous in a maiden of her tender years; the sweetness with which she owned to her womanly weakness in contending with men; or her entire resignation to whatever path of duty should be pointed out to her by Avitus, whom she had so long regarded as the interpreter to her of the divine will.

Aurelian met the Archbishop as he descended from his mule in the courtyard of the convent, whither he had at once repaired on the King's injunction to follow him. 'Well, my son,' he said to him, 'I see by thy countenance it is to be a celebration of espousal, and not of profession, in which I am called upon to officiate.'

'A most propitious marriage, holy Father, since it depends solely on your decision with the royal virgin. She is indeed a pearl of great price, full of queenly dignity and of womanly modesty and sweetness.'

‘Thou sayest true, my son ; she is of a sweet, chastened spirit, subdued to all heavenly graces and virtues. But will the King consent?’

‘He has consented to abide by your decision ; not awed by those fierce Arian lords, but influenced by the power of the great Merovingian. I knew by his countenance his resolution was shaken when he saw the ring, and heard in what manner it was conveyed to the Princess. It seemed to impress him with a warning not to offend lightly a King whose power seemed to be able to effect all he purposed. And, for I do not think him entirely bad, he seemed to feel compunction for the young virgin’s desolate state, the result, too, of his own guilt. The words in which she alluded to that state seemed to touch him to the quick, and for very shame he must have felt repugnant to oppress still more the tender virgin, who, but for his ambition, might have been under the sheltering guardianship of a valiant father and a loving mother. So long as he only thought her a tool in the hands of her mother’s brother, he would have opposed her removal, I believe, even to the last extremity of her death. As soon as you have seen her, the preparation for the espousals will take place in the chapel of the convent. The King will not hear that it should be celebrated either at Lyons or Vienne. He thinks, not unreasonably, that it might be made an opportunity of exciting the people.’

It was not till the next day that Aurelian was summoned by the Archbishop to the presence of the royal virgin. No longer habited as a novice, she wore the robes befitting her princely estate. She rose to greet Aurelian as he entered, meeting him half way. He sank on one knee before her whom he already regarded as his Queen—Queen of France, as Chlovis had named his new kingdom at the Mallum—and taking with veneration the fair and shapely hand she extended to him, he pressed his lips upon it with chivalric fervour.

‘My reverend Father in Christ, the holy Avitus,’ said the Princess to him, ‘tells me much of thee, thou consecrated

priest and soldier, thou pilgrim of Christ ! Thou shalt ever be to me as a brother, thou who wert as the announcing angel to convey to me the mandate of the Most High.'

Great were the preparations going on to give the coming ceremony a splendour warranted by the occasion. Nor were they entirely finished on the eve of the appointed day, when Aurelian, returning with the Archbishop from the inspection of the chapel, passed through the garden of the convent. A touching vision was offered to their eyes, as they entered a path leading to the conservatory, where plants valuable alike for their beauty and their healing properties were cultivated with assiduous care. By the resplendent light of the full moon, they saw the royal bride, attended by those who were to bear her company to the altar, robed in white, wandering amongst the flowers, gathering those of which the bridal wreath was to be entwined. Some rare exotics, cultivated for their flowers, in great request as a fragrant restorative, but still more for their symbolic meaning, when their snowy purity gleamed on the marriage morning on the brow of a maiden, were in full bloom, and filled the air of this soft evening of the late May with a rich and penetrating odour. Such a sight arrested the steps of the Prelate, and he looked on, his eyes moist with emotion and sympathy. The royal virgin flitted from tree to tree, filling the open basket she carried with fresh blooms and white buds of promise, peeping from amidst the shining green leaves. During this occupation, the sweet melody of a hymn in praise of the perpetual purity of the Virgin, Queen of Virgins, rose from her lips and those of her young companions as they followed her steps.

The next morning dawned in rosy splendour. In a room which had been appropriated to the use of the Princess ever since her marriage had been decided, the robing of the bride was taking place with all due solemnity of custom. Her nearest female relatives were around her, fulfilling each their allotted part. Glaswintha, Queen of Burgundy, wife of Gundovald, took, from a shield presented by an attendant,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*.

the iron point of a spear, with which she proceeded to divide the hair on the pure forehead of the royal bride, saying, as she drew the line with this rude and warlike comb—

‘This in token that henceforth thou wilt be the espoused wife of a valiant warrior.’

The long ringlets of her golden brown hair were then carefully brushed and perfumed, and disposed over the royal mantle, fastened on her bosom with jewels of price. Her white robe, woven with gold, and wrought with various colours, fell from beneath in rich folds to her feet. When the dressing of the hair was finished, Friedmunda, the nearest female relation, being sister to the dead mother of the bride, took the virginal crown, entwined with the pageant flowers gathered the evening before with such chastened rites, and placing it on her head, repeated the formula usual to these occasions—

‘And this crown of virgins, token of thy chaste purity, wear with thy conscious right to the claim of all it symbolizes.’ She then threw the long white veil of modesty over her head, whence it fell around her to her feet, a fine silky tissue, to be procured alone in the far East.

Whilst these ceremonies were taking place above, in the courtyard below pawed and neighed the war horse,<sup>2</sup> laden with arms, the sword, the battle-axe, the spear, the shield, to be presented to the bride by two young warriors, Athanaric and his companion, Hermanfrid, this time completely armed, on the part of her warlike bridegroom.

‘I would Ethelbert had the presentation instead of me,’ said Athanaric, as he soothed the impatient animal, stroking its nose and ears. ‘I feel marvellous strange in this business, as I think thou dost also, Hermanfrid.’

‘I shall of a surety forget all I have to say when I find myself in presence of this surpassing bride. Where is Ethelbert, that he is not of this expedition? Would he were here. Naught puts him out.’

‘How know I? Gone he is somewhere, for nigh these three months, and that without a farewell.’

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*.



‘Hark! There is the music of the bridal procession!’ exclaimed Hermanfrid.

Those who had been admitted to the chapel, and were even now anxiously expecting the bride, beguiled the tedium of waiting by commenting on the beauty of its arrangements, the brilliancy of the flowers, the number of the wax tapers, the gold, the silk, the jewels, the tapestry, which everywhere beautified and enriched the walls and altar. But that which most attracted the attention of all present was a shield of silver, enshrined in the crimson folds of the hangings above the altar. On this shield was the portrait of our Blessed Lady crowned, robed in a pale red dress, over which she wore a blue mantle, her golden hair falling over it. The crowned Infant was in her arms, the golden nimbus round His sacred head, parted with the four arms of the crimson cross, symbol of His coming Passion. Not many in the chapel had looked upon such a picture before; fewer still knew that this was the shield Aurelian uncovered only on rare occasions, and which he had received as a present from the Emperor of the East, when at Constantinople some years since. It was supposed to be a copy, as most of those early paintings were, from an original painted by St. Luke, and brought from Jerusalem by the Empress Eudocia, and placed by her sister-in-law, the Empress Pulcheria, in a church she caused to be built for the purpose.

The Archbishop arrived first at the chapel, vested in full pontifical robes, followed by Aurelian in splendid armour, instead of the civil dress of the Roman senator he would have worn on such an occasion, had he not been the representative of the king of a nation which considered any apparel, save that of armour, to be derogatory to the dignity of a warrior. The Archbishop disappeared behind a curtain in the sacrarium, whilst Aurelian remained outside the rails inclosing it, attended by the Antrusion Chararic, the lords Bibrax and Auberon, and six noble young Franks, all in complete armour, Athanaric and Hermanfrid, having presented their charger, being two out of the six.

Then came the procession of the bride. The royal virgin leant on the arm of her cousin Sigismund, son of King Gundovald. The virgins who were with her in the conservatories followed, holding up the long train of her mantle, themselves clothed in white, with myrtle wreaths, long falling hair, and long white veils, not covering them all over like that of the bride, but falling from beneath their wreaths and floating behind them. As this procession entered the chapel the choir burst forth into the anthem, 'All the glory of the King's daughter is within, in golden borders; clothed round about with varieties, she shall be brought with gladness, and she shall be brought into the temple of the King.'

Aurelian met her in front of the altar rails, and receiving her from the hands of her uncle, King Gundovald, who descended from the dais where he sat, Queen Glaswintha beside him, knelt down with her on the crimson cushions placed for that purpose. The Archbishop then solemnly espoused her to him, as proxy for the King of France. When the moment arrived for that part of the ceremony, Aurelian presented the royal bride with a purse of white silk, embroidered with colours, interwoven with gold and gems, containing the customary donation of a halfpenny and a denier,<sup>3</sup> a gift significative that henceforth her husband was bound to provide for her wants.

The ceremony over, Aurelian conducted the young Queen to the dais prepared for them, under a canopy of embroidered silk, opposite that of the King and Queen of Burgundy. The Archbishop, ascending the steps of the altar, intoned the Introit, and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass began. The *Agnus Dei* chanted, the bride and her proxy bridegroom returned to the altar rails, to receive from the hands of the Archbishop the Living Bread which descended from heaven.

The sacred rites over, the espoused pair rose from their seats, to which they had returned for the conclusion of the Mass, and left the chapel to the pealing notes of a nuptial hymn, to be received when they appeared in the court outside

<sup>3</sup> Gifford, *History of France*.

with the shouts of the assembled multitude, admitted to see the bridal procession. Doles of bread and meat and money were distributed to the poor, whilst the young Queen and the representative of her bridegroom returned into the convent, to break the fast they had maintained since the previous evening, when, confessed and shriven, they had retired to the holy meditation and prayer in which they had spent the best part of the night.

Whilst the bride was robing for her long journey, preparations for immediate departure were busily carried on in the courtyard, the same into which Aurelian had entered that memorable evening when he first saw the Princess. Here a waggon, or *basterne*,<sup>4</sup> as it was called, was brought forward, a sort of covered chariot drawn by oxen, whose pace, though slower than that of horses, yet gave a more easy motion to the vehicle. In this *basterne* Aurelian now placed the bride, with the ladies chosen to accompany her, himself riding on one side of the vehicle, the Antrusion on the other. Then came on mules Vedast and Lupus, this last appointed to be the Queen's private chaplain, according to the treaty drawn up by the Archbishop Remigius and confirmed by Avitus. Then followed the remainder of the officers of Chlovis, a body of armed Franks bringing up the rear, followed in their turn, to the great vexation of Aurelian, by the Counts Hagan, Bisinus, and Berthar, who insisted on escorting the young Queen to the confines of what had once been her father's dominions.

His vexation was still further increased when, a few miles from the town, they were joined by an armed force of about fifty of their own party, who, scarcely out of Gundovald's hearing, began to raise loud shouts of defiance, accompanied by fierce threats of vengeance. Aurelian bending down towards the young Queen, on whose dark eyelashes still shone the tears of parting with Avitus and the other tender friends, hitherto her only guardians, implored her not to be alarmed.

'A body of fifty well armed warriors is hovering on our right, a few miles distant, and accompanies us now on our route,'

<sup>4</sup> Gifford, *History of France*.

he said. 'I can send for them whenever I find their presence needful. They have been lying unknown off Geneva for some time, to protect you from violence, or to enable me to carry you off had your uncle persisted in refusing to let you return with me. You see we were determined to have you, when you had once consented,' he added, smiling.

Next day, however, the Arian lords became more demonstrative. They insulted and wounded the people of the house where the Queen had spent the night, and otherwise maltreated the inhabitants of the town through which they had to pass. Things were becoming serious, and Aurelian, seeing they were likely to become worse, made a sign to Athanaric to approach. The young warrior riding up to him, he gave him a whispered message, which he carried out first by falling back into his place, and presently by taking the opportunity of a fresh disturbance to ride off in the direction Aurelian had indicated.

In an hour or two he returned with a large body of Franks, much to the satisfaction of Aurelian and the Antrusion. It was quite time they came. The Count Hagan and his friends, throwing off all disguise, scoured the country round, ravaging, pillaging, and burning out the peaceful inhabitants, to the loud cries of 'Chilperic, Chilperic!' slaying the people, firing the villages, and devastating the harvest fields. Tears ran down the now pale cheeks of the young Queen, thus forced to witness these barbarous acts inflicted on the innocent people, so wholly guiltless of the crime their ruthless murderers professed thus to avenge. At the moment that Count Hagan, returning from one of these raids, galloped up brandishing his sword, reeking with blood, which he meant to present to his niece, Aurelian seized the bridle of his horse and prevented him.

'I oppose these proceedings, Count Hagan, in the presence of the Queen of France, whilst she is under my escort,' he said, in tones of authority. 'Recall your followers, or I must charge them with my brave comrades, followers of the King, who is bound to protect these people from harm, and the dominion of King Gundovald from pillage.'

Greatly incensed with these words, the Count Hagan, with

a sudden movement, forced his bridle from Aurelian's grasp, and galloped up to the chariot now open to the fresh morning air, where the young Queen stood, her hands clasped in fervent prayer, her affrighted ladies cowering around her. As her uncle drew rein alongside the basterne, she looked with a shudder at his blood-stained sword and ferocious appearance.

'My lord Count,' she said with unshaken voice, 'why dost thou commit cruelties on people so entirely innocent of all crime? Thou canst not think by such deeds as these to win the favour of my lord the King, who, the Lord Aurelian tells me, is bound by treaty to avenge them. Rather believe that he will take double vengeance on their perpetrators, as much to fulfil the terms of his treaty with the King Gundovald, as to repudiate all complicity with thy treason.'

Aurelian, who had quickly followed the Count, now interposed between him and his precious charge. 'Retire,' he said, 'or I must proceed to extremities I would rather avoid.'

Athanaric riding up at speed, cried out to Aurelian, 'The Eduan troops are fast coming up, noble Aurelian, on the left. The scouts say they are part of the King's own body guard, whom the villagers have probably found means of informing of what is going on, and they say there is a troop coming upon the right headed by King Gundovald himself.'

'This is thy work, Count Hagan,' said Aurelian, 'and if it ends in the murder or perpetual captivity of thy royal niece, thou wilt have no one to thank for it but thyself. Noble Chararic, thou hast never yet turned thy back on flashing swords, but this is no enemy of our lord King. Therefore I entreat thee use thy utmost speed to put as great a distance as possible between the men coming up and our royal charge and her retinue. I, with these our brave comrades, will await the approach of the Eduans, and protect your retreat.'

'I pray thee, my Lord Aurelian, come with us,' implored the young Queen. 'Oh, why must my marriage robes be thus dyed with blood?'

'Let us yoke the oxen and harness horses to the basterne,' said Chararic, 'and make the best of our way to Besançon.'

Thou and I can bring up the rear, noble Aurelian, and fall upon them if they molest us.'

'I have no desire to draw my sword, owing allegiance to our royal master,' said Aurelian, 'against the King of Burgundy to-day. But be it as thou sayest, I can answer him as well if he overtake us, as here.'

'Better still,' suggested the Countess Friedmunda; 'the safety of the young Queen is the principal thing. Let the Lord Aurelian take her up on his horse, and fly with her. These valiant warriors will prevent any pursuit of her, and will protect us.'

'This is good counsel,' said Aurelian, who instantly prepared to carry it out, in spite of the urgent entreaties of the young Queen not to be separated from her party.

The transfer of the Queen to Aurelian's<sup>5</sup> horse was soon made, and he set off with her surrounded at first by a group of twenty armed Franks, so as to mask their flight from the Burgundians. These, however, suspecting this body of men detached in front, hotly pursued it. Aurelian directed some of his followers, not to fight them, but to fly before them, thus leading them away from the pursuit. This ruse succeeded very well at first, till the Burgundians perceiving what it meant, precipitated themselves in the track of Aurelian. A party detached by Chararic charged them with so much energy that most of the enemy were rolled in the dust. Two, however, pursued Aurelian most pertinaciously, and it was only by the strength of his horse and his superior riding that he was enabled to enter the gates of Besançon a few minutes before them, and seek shelter for the young Queen in the palace of her uncle, King Godegesil.

The remainder of the route was now pursued in peace, the confidence of the young Queen increasing as she drew near the frontiers of a country henceforth to be her own. From every town through which she passed, the Catholic clergy and their flocks poured forth in procession to meet her, bringing her into their walls to the sound of sacred music and religious chant.

<sup>5</sup> Mengel, *History of Germany*.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### *The Worship of the veiled Ceridwen.*

WHEN Aurelian departed on his second embassy to the Court of Burgundy, it became imperative on Chlovis to inform his sister of his approaching marriage. She received the news much more graciously than he had expected. He had not reckoned on the satisfaction she felt in the opportunity it afforded her of revenge on the man who had slighted the offer of her hand for his son. To see Gundovald forced into an alliance so repugnant to him, involving, if Chlovis chose, as no doubt he would, to make good his claim to the throne of Burgundy in right of his wife, even the degradation of that son whom he had deemed too high for her, was a source of gratification to her, which caused her to hold as trivial every other contingency in connection with it. That she felt the change it would be to her position in the palace, was patent to Chlovis, when she claimed his promise of an allod,<sup>1</sup> declaring her intention to raise a home for herself, and thus become independent of all. The King felt she had been already aggrieved to see Sigismer depart, and make no sign, and it was a lucky thing for the Eastern Prince that Siegbert also had left Soissons without claiming her hand, for she was perverse enough to have gone away with the Ripuarian King at this crisis, as much to spite Sigismer for his silence as her brother for his disregard of her feelings, in thus bringing a new mistress into the palace where she had hitherto reigned supreme.

Once in possession of her domain, as she called it, her spirits rose, and she was all energy. Chlovis, anticipating her ultimate acceptance of his gift, had so urged on the building of

<sup>1</sup> Freehold.

the pfalzen, as it was called, or villa, that it was already far on its way to completion. He had also so liberally planted and stocked the farm with everything needful, that it bid fair to become before long as productive as one of his own manors. Llantildis soon took so much interest in her new toy, that she forgot all her grievances, and became as gracious as before the defection of 'Tiger's' master, and the disgrace to which she had consigned poor 'Tiger' himself, banished from her presence.

There was one who had disappeared from the palace, whose absence Llantildis was not likely to notice, still less to resent. Myrrha, however, felt it, nor could she imagine what had become of the noble Ethelbert. Many a time had she met him since that morning of the wolf hunt, but never for her had been renewed the delight of that meeting. All she had ever received from him since had been the gravest of smiles, when he had not been too abstracted in thought to notice her as he passed. Even this small pleasure was over for her now, nor could she find one single clue to his disappearance, nor could Juba, ever ready to busy himself in the affairs of others, succeed in his efforts to enlighten her on this point.

He had already departed on his mission to Armorica when these changes lately mentioned took place. Remigius, yearning with compassion for the few Catholics remaining in that doomed country, had urged his departure, at the same time confining him to a mere recognizance of the existing state of the land and its inhabitants, and giving him strict charge not to linger more than he could help in one place.

'And if,' he continued, 'thou hast the good fortune to meet the noble virgin Iërne in thy wanderings, convey if thou mayest this token to her hand. Shouldst thou have speech of her, bid her cling fast to it in hope. Alas, that she should have been snatched away from our care before this had become to her a rod and a staff to comfort her, even in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death.'

Saying this, he took from the table beside him a small bronze crucifix, beautifully chased and fastened to a chain of the same



metal of curious workmanship. Bidding the young man kneel down, he passed it round his neck, and gave him his pastoral benediction.

Journeying as a Gaulish servant on a message of trust, Ethelbert, following the directions of Celsin, did not enter Armorica at once. Passing Carnutes, once the principal seat of the Druids, where, in days long since past away, were held the annual gatherings and high festivals of their religion, he descended the frontier till he came to the banks of the Loire, at this epoch far beyond the Merovingian sway. Arrived at Nantes, he changed his dress for that of a Breton soldier, the same that Gwench'lan and Budik wore at their conference in the cave in the forest. Girt round the wolf skin covering his breast, was the belt and sword the King had given to him the night when he first intrusted him with his present mission. It was not from pride or any superstitious feeling that he had put it on for this expedition, although the sword which such a valiant warrior as Chlovis had worn was the very weapon to buckle on at a time when he might need its best services. It was rather from a faint hope that he might have the opportunity ere his mission were ended, of laying it at the feet of her to whom the King had bidden him offer it as a weapon to be used in her rescue.

Far different from the teeming life and busy excitement he had left behind him, where his comrades were actively engaged building and planting their future homes and fields, was the desolate country he now entered. Turning north and bearing slightly west, the farther he proceeded the more solitary became his path. Nor was it at all times easy to find his way in these gloomy deserts, over these trackless marshes, these ever recurring bogs, by these solitary lakes, from whence the wild fowl rose screaming at his approach, protesting with unearthly cries against his intrusion, and rendering the solitude still more dismal, as if they had been the evil spirits to whom this unhappy country had been given over, rising to resist his errand. Sometimes he was guided by a single watch-fire on a distant hill, or light from a hut, where, hid in the recesses of a

wood, some poor wretch, hunted by Gwench'lan, clinging in hunger and misery to the pure faith of Christianity, transmitted to him by his forefathers who had learnt it from their Roman conquerors, prayed night and day for the hour of deliverance appointed by God. To these the messenger of Remigius was particularly welcome. He spoke enough of their language to be able to convey to them the messages with which the Archbishop had intrusted him.

From these men he learnt much of what was taking place in the country, the best means of penetrating securely through the morasses and woods, as well as what places he should avoid, as being strongholds of Gwench'lan. In the few towns through which he passed he found the ruins of churches, and the best part of the populace dispersed. It was chiefly on quitting these towns that he found in some neighbouring desert, lurking in caves or rude huts of turf, the miserable fugitives who had lost everything in the ruin which had overtaken them. It was from such as these that he learnt that the farther north he went the nearer he approached the seat of Gwench'lan's power, situated as far as Rennes, only more to the west, on the banks of the Vilaine. They thought he might be in the neighbourhood of Le Mans or Alençon, preparing, so they had been told, for a grand festival to be held about this time. Ethelbert determined to push on to the latter of these places, as he could change his route on further intelligence.

The country through which he now passed seemed to change, as well as the men he occasionally met. It was less marshy in places, more open, while large tracts of heath and rising ground became the most prevalent feature. Here also the young Frank more often met the signs of a religion once wholly abolished, now reviving with an expiring vigour under the efforts of a man devoted to the cause. Large dolmens reared their stern threatening heads, and now and then a cromlech, with its broad upper stone partly overgrown with moss and lichen, which, at a distance, might well have been taken for the dark stains of some inhuman sacrifice, to which purpose they had once served.

One morning, not quite a month since he had left Rheims, he entered a thick forest of ancient but still vigorous oaks. From all that Celsin had told him he felt he was now very possibly within the limits of a grove consecrated to this dread worship. Solitude and silence reigned there, a silence broken only by the distant scream of the eagle soaring over some prey, or the nearer cawing of the rooks, now busy with their nests in the taller trees. Suddenly he came to an open glade in this wood, bearing the appearance of a barren heath, where he was almost startled by the singular apparition before his eyes. A number of huge stones, the smallest of which seemed nine or ten feet high, ranged in rows, formed what at one time might have been a circle; at present, however, all shape was lost. There they stood, in the stern silence of the oak forest around them, a forest themselves of huge grey crags, tokens of some mighty power long since passed away. The young Frank gazed on the strange sight with feelings almost amounting to awe. What could be the meaning of this strange forest of stones within a forest of oaks? Who were the men who had first reared them; to what purpose had they served; what dreadful scenes had they once witnessed?

There was no one to whom he could address these questions, and if there had been, no one could have answered him unless he had been fortunate or rather unfortunate enough to fall in with Gwench'lan himself. He, learned in the lore of long past ages, could have said why they stood there, these silent witnesses of a powerful race, whose footsteps were still printed in such indelible marks. The waves of centuries had passed over that race, and its actors and actions were alike unknown to the present.

Ethelbert would have scarcely found his way through the mazes of this vast labyrinth had he not caught a glimpse of a retiring figure amongst the stones higher up. His heart beat quicker as he perceived the folds of a white robe, but presently the wearer reappeared, and he saw it was a man with a long flowing beard, and hair bound with a green wreath. Following this person, he contrived to keep him in

view till he came to a thicker part of the oak wood, where he disappeared.

The young Frank began to perceive that he must be close upon the haunts of Gwench'lan, or of men belonging to him. Under the huge gnarled oaks, spreading their giant branches overhead, scarcely as yet clothed with the tender green of the unfolding leaves, enormous stones were cropping up in the wide paths covered with the fresh springing grass. A low monotonous chant was heard in the distance, waking in his mind a confused memory of something familiar in its tones and rhythm. He was careful to keep under the cover of the oak grove, that he might see as much as he could before he was discovered, especially as he had a glimpse, at some distance up a glade opening before him, of five or six men in full white robes and golden ornaments, flashing in the rays of the sun streaming in on them where they sat as it might be in council. Valiant as he was dauntless, his heart beat when he saw them, awed by their majestic appearance and the dignity of their countenances. The distant chant drew nearer and nearer, and now he distinguished the words, and it flashed back to his memory the song of the sword dance. Yes; tone and rhythm were alike, but the words were not the same. Thus they sang—

O sun, O great king of the glorious field ! O sun, O great king !  
Let the rainbow shine on thy brow ! Let the rainbow shine !

O fire, O fire, O steel, O steel, O fire, O fire, O oak, O oak,  
O waves, O waves, O earth, O earth and oak !<sup>2</sup>

On it came in circles, the weird unearthly chorus, whilst strange music accompanied it, the clashing cymbals, the sharp twanged strings of harp ; on it came till the young Frank thought it must burst forth upon him. His brain grew dizzy with the whirling sounds, he leant his head against an oak, veiling his eyes with his hands, as if to shut out a sight on which he dared not gaze.

Just as the crashing sounds seemed so near that the unseen singers must break out full upon him, they suddenly retreated,

<sup>2</sup> De Villemarque, *Chants de la Bretagne*.

as if they had whirled round and were retrograding, their chant dying away in the distance. Relieved from the immediate pressure on his brain, caused partly by surprise, partly by the ill defined memories of his fatherland and dread of gazing with profane eyes on the consecrated rites, he removed his hand from his eyes, and looked around to see what path he had best follow, not knowing but that all might lead him into the very presence of Gwench'lan. Great as had been his surprise a few moments before, it became now speechless amazement, whilst his heart leapt with wild bounds against his side. Awe, amounting almost to fear, seemed to have driven away every other emotion for the moment, for there she came, right up the path towards him, she whom he sought, the noble captive, the sovereign lady of his inmost soul, Iërne, the Armorican Princess !

Dressed in flowing white robes, over which streamed the regal mantle of her luxuriant hair, dark as night, yet glowing with the purple of the raven's wing, crowned with a wreath of oak twined with vervain ; she came, the very impersonation of the dread mother, the all-powerful,<sup>3</sup> whose chariot, drawn by two white cows, was brought out once a year, with mystic rites, and washed in the hidden sacred lake.

Ethelbert fell on his knees, and stretched out his clasped hands towards her. He knew it was she whom he sought, but there was something so pure, so holy, so unearthly about her, that he could scarcely sever the idea of the supernatural from the reality, nor decide whether she really were the goddess Frigga of his early teaching, or the beautiful mortal in whom all the hopes of his life were centred. Slowly she came up the path, her eyes on the ground, nor did she see her kneeling votary till within a few paces of him. The moment she saw him, she started in alarm ; then, perceiving that the man in her path wore the dress of a Breton, she recovered herself, and said in a low rich voice, whose soft full tones thrilled through the heart of Ethelbert, and rapt him in ecstasy—

'Thou needest not fear me. If thy presence here is involuntary, retire quickly ! I will not be the person to deliver

<sup>3</sup> Gibbon ; Michelet, *Hist. de France*.

thee up to a punishment all too swift and severe. Alas, thou must indeed be a stranger to these parts, thus rashly to intrude into the inmost recesses of the sacred grove. Another step beyond these boundaries and thou wert in the presence of the dread altar itself, may be to stand face to face with its still more dread high priest. No prayer of mine could have redeemed thee had his wrath been awakened against thee.'

The young Frank gazed on her face, drinking in through his eyes every feature of her beloved countenance, and through his ears the sweet solemn tones of her low, mournful, and compassionating voice. He could not command his voice enough to answer, but drawing the bronze crucifix from his breast, he passed it over his head, removing his helmet for that purpose, and disclosing his features to her view.

'Ah!' she said, the blood rushing in crimson flushes over her face, to retreat again and leave it more pale even than it was before. Taking the sacred symbol from his hands, she pressed it eagerly to her lips.

'Dost thou come from the great King, to say that he will rescue me from this dreadful bondage? Dost thou come from the consecrated Mother, to recall me to her sheltering bosom? Oh, thou art not an Armorican! I know thee now, valiant warrior. It was thou, thou who shielded me from the degradation and insult of lawless men in that long and wearisome journey. How camest thou here? with what purpose? Oh, say, say the King will seek me! He will deliver me from this dreadful bondage!'

'He will come, sovereign lady. He sends me to you; he bids me say he will arm to deliver you, if this bondage is more than you can bear. He bids me lay this sword at your feet,' he continued, unsheathing his sword and laying it before her. 'He has tracked the lawless men who tore you from that sacred refuge, and will surely avenge that wrong upon their heads. These are my tokens,' he added, presenting to her the small book she had dropped in the passage, 'and this,' giving her the illuminated slip of parchment with her name upon it. She stretched out her hand to receive both, and

Ethelbert, reverently pressing to his lips what he now knew was her beloved name, gave it into her hands. He had received both, for the purpose, by a messenger from the Abbess Anastasia when she had heard from Aurelian on what errand he was going.

Deep gratitude to Him, Who had heard her imploring cry from the profound darkness, swelled her heart with the first emotion of happiness she had felt since that fatal evening. With a movement full of gracious meaning, she returned the slip of parchment to the still kneeling Ethelbert, who received it with a cry of joy he failed to suppress.

‘Keep it as a token of my deep gratitude for thy message, most valiant and fearless youth; of my deep sense of thy worth, thou who hast not hesitated to penetrate alone the paths of this dread forest to seek me out. Whenever that name henceforth greets thine eye, think it is the name of a most unhappy maiden, who consumes her life yearning for the hour when she may be permitted to return to the bosom of the sheltering and compassionate mother from whose arms she was torn. Was it found in the passage? Didst thou find it where I had dropped it, hoping some one might see it?’

‘Yes, most noble Princess. I had the happy task allotted to me to track the steps of the ruthless men who stole you from the protection of my lord the King. I found these where you dropped them. The bronze ornament is a token of fatherly remembrance, of fervent prayer for your deliverance, from the consecrated Remigius, the High Priest of Rheims. He confided it to my care the day before I left to come here, hoping I might be fortunate enough to meet you.’

On hearing these words, Iërne again pressed the crucifix to her lips; then taking the one she wore, concealed in the folds of her dress next her heart, she made the young warrior stoop his head, and passed the black ribbon to which it was attached round his neck, replacing it round her own with the bronze chain of the token she esteemed so dear, the token of her coming rescue.

‘Hie thee back, valiant youth, to the great King who sent thee. Say to him I await with patience the deliverance which he now promises me. Oh, happy could I purchase with my blood, the deliverance of this unfortunate country, the restoration of a more compassionating faith, a creed which teaches a loving Saviour shedding His own Blood to redeem us from the captivity of sin, not the shedding of the blood of His servants in fierce atonement for crimes it is all too powerless to efface. Haste thee hence, lest the wrath of my dread uncle overtake thee, and silence for ever on thy lips the message I give thee to the great King. Ah!’ she exclaimed, as a shadow darkened the path behind the kneeling Ethelbert, ‘he is here!’

‘What rash intruder is this?’ asked Gwench’lan, in deep measured tones, as he came upon this scene. ‘Well may he kneel to sue for pardon of his rash daring at thy feet, O chaste Priestess of the dread Ceridwen!’

It was well for the young Frank that he was still kneeling, his head bent down to the ground, as if still listening to the solemn words issuing from the lips he held so sacred, to the injunctions his heart leapt to obey: This posture, expressive of deep humility and profound veneration, could also be interpreted as one of supplication for involuntary fault.

‘Thou mayest believe me if I say he is a stranger here,’ answered Iërne, emboldened by the impression she saw her uncle entertained of the scene before him. ‘His tongue is not of this country, but proclaims him a stranger and foreign to these woods. Remain in that posture of supplication till thy fate is decided, rash man, by those who know better than thyself the extent of the offence thou hast committed.’

The words, the tone of her voice, confirmed Gwench’lan in his interpretation of the scene, whilst Ethelbert felt it was the more effectually to screen his features from her uncle’s scrutiny that the Princess ordered him to remain as he was. A short conversation then took place between the Druid, for such he appeared from his dress, and the Princess, in a language unknown to any save the highest ranks of the priesthood, a language which Ethelbert could not understand. Yet no



fear was his as he still knelt, his head bowed down between them. His heart was full of unbounded joy. He had seen her; she knew him again. She had noticed him, his silent worship, his endeavours to shield her from the annoyance of the Ripurian King. She permitted him to do her service, since she had returned her beloved name to him, and had not reproved him when he pressed it to his lips. What if the sacrificial sword did drink his heart's blood that night? he would die with joy for her—joy that he had been able to convey hope to her in the midst of her despair. He should die a warrior's death by the sword, and the King and all his comrades would avenge his death and rescue her he loved from the bondage she abhorred. Ah! in such a cause would not his blood be well shed?

The short colloquy over between Iërne and her uncle, the former again spoke to Ethelbert. 'Listen,' she said; 'hadst thou not been a stranger to these woods, no prayer could have saved thee from the wrath of the offended majesty of the dread Unseen, whose presence will be amongst us this night. Rise, and follow this her robed priest. Food thou must not taste, houseless wanderer though thou be amongst these sacred oaks, for this night thou shalt stand before the altar of the awful Ceridwen. If thou canst bear, unflinching, the sharp ordeal of fire and water, thy offence may be pardoned, and thou not depart from hence unsworn by the triple vow, by water, by blood, by fire. Lock thy lips with the key of silence, till the awful vow shall be demanded of thee. Should one word escape thy lips till then, know thy doom is sealed. Rise, resume thy sword and helmet; cover those audacious eyes which would have gazed on the sacred rites; let not thy features be revealed, that men recognize not again the face of him who sinned, yet escaped the immediate punishment due to his crime.'

In these words the young Frank read a double meaning. His condemnation to silence and the muffling up of his features well suited to mask him from curious questioning of eye or tongue, be it from whom it might, even from the stern Gwench'lan himself. Whatever happened he was determined

to bear, proud to display his courage and his constancy before her who had showed so much confidence in his fortitude. He turned his eyes to hers as he rose, with one last passionate vow of devotion, and prepared to follow Gwench'lan, his breast thrilling with the joy of the silent answer he had received from her look. Come what might he cared not. Death would be far more preferable to him than to lose her esteem.

Silence and concealment seemed to reign supreme amongst these strange people. Not a word passed the lips of his stern guide, into whose face Ethelbert had refrained to look. A short distance brought them to a bank, formed partly of grey stone, partly of a mound of turf overgrown with bushes; the same before which Fergan led Gwench'lan and Budik the night in which the abduction of Iërne was planned. Pressing his finger against the stone as before, the Druid entered the passage leading into the vaulted cavern. Here, without a word, he left the young Frank.

Without his experience of these sort of caves or passages, Ethelbert might have been startled to find himself thus immured in a living tomb. He knew he could confidently trust in the protection of her who seemed to exercise considerable authority even over the uncle, under whose thralldom she yet groaned. He therefore waited in patience, and soon his eyes, dazzled and blinded by the midday glare, began to be reconciled to the darkness of the cave. A slight noise overhead causing him to raise his eyes, he perceived a faint glimmer of daylight, as if some opening had just then been made in the roof. A few minutes after this welcome change he was enabled to see, not only the extent of the small cave, but also the remains of the mossy seats which, gathered together, might well serve him for a couch. Reminded by the words of Iërne prohibiting him food that he had an ample supply left in the satchel that he carried, he took some out and prepared to eat it. Not that he cared much for any; the exciting events which had succeeded each other so rapidly seemed to have absorbed all bodily sensations in the mental emotion they had awakened. But he knew it would be the best thing to recruit his strength by

means of food and rest, and thus enable himself to meet with undaunted courage whatever trial of body or mind awaited his release from prison.

How soon after his midday meal he had gone to sleep on the moss he had gathered together he could not tell. For some time he had seemed to lie there in silent but happy thought, till it was exchanged for ecstatic dreams of her to whom he had vowed the most unchanging devotion of heart and soul. He had never asked himself whether this peerless sovereign of his heart should ever be his; the thought was far from his mind. She seemed so high above him, so entirely belonging to the great King who had intrusted him with this mission, that no thought save that of the most distant and silent devotion had seemed possible to him.

Gwench'lan bent over him, torch in hand, not knowing at first, so motionless he lay, whether death had overtaken him, brought on by the dread anticipation of the unknown fate that awaited him, or fear of the extent of the power he had provoked. When he found that he really was sound asleep, helmet on head and sword by his side, like a true soldier, he was surprised into admiration of a constancy which recked so little of a threatening danger. The light of the torch and the strong pungent smell of its smoke at length awakened him. For one moment he gazed into the face of the man leaning over him, the next he was on his feet, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

This action, his bold attitude, the fearless defiance of his flashing eyes, pleased Gwench'lan, who admired moral courage more than that of mere brute force. A smile relaxed his stern features, as if to remind the young man he was his guide as yet, not his executioner, and then turning with the single word 'follow,' he led the way out of the cave.

Night had fallen in the meantime, and on the dark path in which he now followed Gwench'lan through the thick oak wood no light fell, save the torch which his guide carried. After a few short windings of this path, the two suddenly emerged into a wide space, a circle of greensward, cleared of

all trees. The radiance of the full moon poured down on this inclosure, at one point of which stood an altar, composed of three huge stones, two upright, and one lying across as a slab. On stones placed as steps stood Iërne, in the same robes which she had worn in the morning, her beautiful arms bare to the shoulder, stirring the fire burning on the altar with a branch she held with one hand, whilst with the other she fed it with incense, causing clouds of thick smoke to rise in circling eddies. Gwench'lan, giving the young Frank in charge to some men, also in white robes, standing near, went out of the circle to return almost immediately, in the stately garb of an Arch-Druid, his golden ornaments, his massive gorget, distinguishing marks of his supremacy in the priesthood, flashing in the light of the sacrificial fire and that of the full moon, fast rising above the giant oaks, grim sentinels of the sacred inclosure. As Gwench'lan entered the circle, brazen tripods, placed at equal distances in front of the stone altar, were also fed by the attendant priests with incense, and Iërne, turning towards the moon, commenced a low chant, gradually swelling higher and higher as she went on, accompanied on an orphean, or small harp, with a gold frame, by Gwench'lan, standing in front of the tripods.

Ride forth in thy silver boat, O fairest bride, O silver moon,  
ride forth !

Who in thy silver boat dost ride the waves of the stormy deluge,  
O ark resting on the mountain top, the strong rock.

Rise, O spouse beloved ! Thy bridegroom rides forth to meet  
thee. He rides forth in his majesty to meet thee, O most fair !

Light of the dark night, the life of man, O great mother, in thy  
bosom thy children find refuge. O ark in whose bosom is enshrined  
the law, the law of the great covenant !

O silver shining berry, whose life is from the strong oak.  
O chaste spouse, O celestial bride, whose life is from the strength  
of the Omniscient, the Omnipotent, the Omnipresent, the one God,  
the Triune King, the Light of the life immortal.

The life immortal, where live the children of the new birth.

Arise, O chaste spouse, O great mother ! In thy bosom thou  
bearest thy children, the children of the great King.

Then burst from the attendant priests the loud chorus, accompanied with clash of cymbals and the long drawn out notes of trumpets.

O celestial bride, O great queen, O ark, O celestial bride !

Thus prayed the royal virgin Iërne and the Armorican priests in the far west, that very night when, in the far east, the royal virgin Chlotildis and the virgins that bore her company prayed amongst the trees in the conservatory of the House of our Lady at Geneva.

In this strange spectacle, amidst these strange sounds, bewildering to every sense, Ethelbert saw but the beautiful Iërne, heard but the thrilling accents of her voice, swelling as if new hope had arisen in her heart. Twice some one standing beside him had to touch him on the shoulder before he could attract his attention. 'Follow!' said the man, turning short down one of the open glades of the oak forest behind them. Ethelbert, though in perfect ignorance of what he might next expect, boldly followed the rapid steps of his guide. On and on, and on they sped, whilst hymn and chant and chorus died fainter and fainter on the ear as the distance increased beneath their flying footsteps. On the borders of, the forest they paused.

'Straight on!' said his guide, 'nor stop, nor look behind. Keep thy face to the rising sun by day, to the rising moon by night. Front the celestial Lyre and the swift-flying Swan. On thy right hand keep the bright Arcturus, the baleful Scorpion, glaring blood red, scarce risen above the horizon. Fly! nor stay thy steps for aught. Pursue thy mission. Obedient to her behests, I bid thee speed with the message thou knowest of, as if pale death were behind thee.'

The young Frank needed no second bidding. He understood at once that it was Iërne who had set him free, the agent who had acted under her directions not knowing but that he was sent on a mission of importance to the chief he obeyed. Thinking that Ethelbert would understand them, he gave him

the same directions for his route that he would have followed himself, not aware that, unfortunately, the young soldier did not know one star from another. As his guide turned back on the path they had come, Ethelbert set out on his homeward track with a heart beating high, and keeping time to a hymn of enthusiastic love and devotion, which lent wings to his feet, and nerved him with a courage equal to every obstacle which could oppose him.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### *The Marriage at Soissons.*

It was well known in Soissons that the royal bride had arrived from Chalons the evening before, and was now staying at the Pfalzen Chlotildis, one of the King's villas, a few miles from the city, and fitted up with a splendour becoming the residence of the future Queen of France. Report had spoken so highly of her beauty, grace, and piety, that she was already in possession of all hearts, and her arrival was almost as anxiously expected by the populace as by the royal bridegroom.

It was a lovely morning, and the young companions of the bride were flitting about in their excitement, peering into everything, and running back to tell her of the marvellous things they had seen—the bees, the young fowls, and the pigeons coming down to be fed when the corn was scattered. She sat at the door of the room, through which, had she been so inclined, she could have passed into the blooming garden beyond, listening to the joyous chatter of her maidens, yet scarcely heeding them. She could not stifle a deep anxiety as to the approaching meeting with the husband who was as yet a stranger to her, and but for the good sense of her well-ordered mind, she would have shrunk from it in affright. Her light-hearted companions could not understand her, and they laughed and fluttered about, out of the room, into the garden, bringing her lovely flowers to try and tempt her out to admire them.

In the midst of their wildest glee, a sound was heard which made the heart of the royal bride beat fast. The clattering of horse hoofs at a fast trot sounded on the road, and presently a mounted warrior passed, skirting the wall of the garden on the

side where Chlotildis was sitting, and turned round towards the gate of the courtyard in front of the pfälzen.

‘Oh, what a handsome creature!’ cried Gunhilda, the cousin, and most exciteable of the maidens of the young Queen. ‘Such a lovely pair of dark grey eyes, and a darling moustache! Didst thou see under his helmet his long fair hair all in curls on his shoulders?’

‘Yes; and he looked in as he passed,’ said Fritildis, also cousin to the Queen, ‘as if seeking for some one. He wanted to see what we were all like. May not he be come from the King to say we are to set off at once? Would we could go in by torchlight, as arranged for us.’

‘It is the King himself!’ said the young Queen, who had felt a strange throb in her breast as she had encountered the searching glance of those dark grey eyes, evidently seeking some one. She had turned pale as she met them, overcome with an emotion she could scarcely define, so mixed was it with hope and fear and pleasure. Some time passed, and their privacy was not invaded by any strange entrance or even message. She thought she had been deceived, and resumed her meditations, interrupted by this incident.

It was the King she had seen. A few seconds after he had passed the window, he was dismounting in the courtyard, where Aurelian was inspecting the splendid chariot which had just arrived, and the white mules with jewelled trappings and silk housings, destined to convey the royal bride into Soissons that evening.

‘Didst meet my messenger at Dijon?’ asked the King, warmly grasping his friend’s hand. ‘I feared the pfälzen would not be ready. It is not so bad—is it? Does she like it?’

Aurelian smiled. ‘Which question is to have my first answer?’ he asked, as they entered the house. ‘It was at Dijon I met thy messenger, and right glad was I to find we were to halt here. We shall all,’ he said, with emphasis, ‘be much refreshed by the rest.’

‘But the Princess—the Queen—where is she? Did I see her sitting by the door opening into the garden as I came



along? There were several maidens with her. Yes; the rest would be acceptable to her. And I would see her—meet her alone. Can it be so managed, Aurelian? For this purpose it was I wished thee to remain here.'

'But for thy message I should be now in Soissons, my good lord, for she is well escorted. King Godegesil joined us after we left Besançon. He loves his royal niece right well, and vows he will give her away to you himself to-morrow. The Countess Friedmunda is also with us.'

'They are both heartily welcome. But canst thou manage a private interview for me, my good Aurelian? so that she may see me unawares, and not be frightened.'

Aurelian looked at the King and smiled. 'Thou art not much of a countenance, my good lord, to affright a maiden, rather to make glad her heart. I will get thee speech of her alone. Thou dost ask me how she likes this place? Much—at least, what she has seen of it. Her maidens have overrun it in the glee of their hearts. She seems not over curious, nor anxious for much sightseeing, nor given to much speech. She became more silent as we drew nearer, nor spoke save to ask me in private some question concerning thee, and if I could tell her what thou didst most approve a woman should be.'

'And what didst thou answer her, my valiant Aurelian?' asked the King.

'Even every tittle like her gracious self. Oh, my good lord, she is a rare bundle of sweet-smelling spices, a jewel fit for a King to wear, a pearl of great price. She is of most surpassing beauty of mind, as well as of aspect; of a discretion most seemly, almost strange in one of her tender years.'

The King's eyes sparkled; a great joy filled his valiant heart to hear his friend thus describe the maiden he was to wed next day. 'Dost thou think, Aurelian,' he asked, 'thou couldst lure her into the conservatory, under pretence of showing her the rose laurels and the fragrant trees that came from Aquitaine?'

'That is not difficult, my good lord. Thou being there, she could remain with thee.'

‘Thou mayest remain, Aurelian ; I mind thee not. Perchance she would like thee to be with her, at least at first.’

‘At thy will, my good lord. An she be not greatly abashed, I can leave thee with her. The Countess Friedmunda can join you after awhile.’

‘Even so, my good Aurelian ; thou knowest well how to manage this.’

‘Right glad am I to forward thy pleasure. Thou shouldst needs wish to see her who is to be thy life’s companion before the crowd intervene. If thou wilt now go to the conservatory, it may not be long before I lead her there.’

‘Say not I shall be there, Aurelian ; she might fear to come, expecting to meet me.’

‘That would be but a formal affair, were she prepared beforehand. Remove not thy helmet, my lord,’ continued Aurelian, seeing the King prepare to lay it aside. ‘It fits thy warlike countenance right well.’

‘I would not affright her, Aurelian, with this wolf’s grinning jaws. Rather would I put this on,’ he said, taking a plain gold circlet out of a coffer he unlocked on the table. ‘I look not quite so fierce ; and thou knowest I am proud of my hair,’ he added, smiling, as he smoothed it down with an ivory comb which he also took out of the coffer, adjusting his hair and the circlet on his head before a polished steel shield, reflecting his handsome face with all the accuracy of a mirror. Aurelian was much amused to see so doughty a warrior take so much anxious pains to look well in the eyes of a young girl just sixteen, and bred all her life in a convent.

‘If I judge her rightly,’ he said to the King, ‘she will much prefer the helmet. True, thou lookest more of the lover thus, and right handsome both ways. I must say that to encourage thee ; it is not meet thou shouldst lose thy self-confidence when thou requirest it most.’

‘Doubtless it will return, Aurelian,’ said the King, laughing, ‘especially if I see the maiden approves me. Go thou and fetch her. Tell her of the strange and beautiful fish that came from

Naples. They are come, are they not? I will be near that pond.'

Aurelian, instead of going directly to the room where the young Queen was, went to seek the Countess Friedmunda. He thought by letting her into the secret of their plan, she could much forward it. She was well pleased when she heard of the King's very natural desire to see his bride alone for a few minutes, and smiled at his anxiety to look his best in her eyes. She rose from her inspection of some last arrangements in the robes the bride was to wear on the morrow, and went with Aurelian to the room, where they found the young Queen listening to marvellous accounts of the wonders in the conservatory.

'Do come and see it,' they pleaded, 'it will well repay thy trouble.'

'By and bye,' she answered; 'not now,' she continued, looking up, her heart beating with expectation as the door opened and Aurelian and her aunt entered. Then her eyes fell again; disappointment in her heart, though she could scarcely have said why; and then she fell back on her old occupation, that of listening to her thoughts.

'Yes, dear child,' said the Countess, going up to her and taking her hand; 'it would be but poor thanks to the great King who has been at such pains to fit this palace for thy reception, not to see all the beauty he has assembled in it for thy pleasure. There is a most lovely pond there thou shouldst go and see. White water lilies float on the water, ferns overshadowing it, and most beautiful fish are swimming there, their bright scales flashing in the sun. There is a sight there well worth thine eyes,' she said, smiling at the double meaning of her words. 'Go thou with the Lord Aurelian. These giddy maidens must come with me; they have been running all over the place this morning, instead of inquiring if all is right in their equipments for to-morrow. No, no, thou art not to go with the Queen; she does not want thee, Gunhilda,' she said to her own daughter, 'nor thou either, Fritigild. What would thy mother say, and for that matter the Count Hagan also, if

thou wert not in every point fitted as becomes his daughter? Come, I must use my authority here. Now, Chlotildis, rouse thyself. It will divert thy thoughts, and will be much better for thee than sitting here thinking of to-morrow. Why, thou wilt be as pale as a ghost, shutting thyself up, instead of blooming as our rose of Burgundy should. Come, maidens.'

Fritigild and Gunhilda knew the Countess meant them to go with her, and that they had nothing for it but to obey; so they went out, followed by the rest of their companions. Gunhilda, slightly pinching her cousin's arm as they went out by way of premonitory warning, whispered for her edification—

'I know now, it *was* the King we saw on horseback, and he is by the fish pond in the conservatory, waiting to see his bride. What would I not give to see the meeting? Will he kiss her, dost thou think?'

'Thou hadst better not think so much of kisses, Gunhilda,' replied Fritigild. 'If it be as thou sayest, and the King is there, it is fittest we should be far away from such a meeting. Remember, this is no longer child's play here; and, my poor coz, thou wilt have to learn discretion in a country where women are looked up to, I hear, as to something little less than divine. I foresee, for thee, a return to the stern rule of Queen Glaswintha, if thou learnest not soon to forget thy kittenhood and achieve a becoming gravity. I know thou admirest the handsome Franks too much to submit to such a fate with content.'

Gunhilda pouted her lips as she followed her aunt, giving her cousin an extra pinch for her dry sermon, as she called it. During this time, Chlotildis, leaning on Aurelian's arm, was passing from flower to flower in the conservatory, admiring each in its turn, wholly unconscious that she herself was the flower the King was admiring, as he stood at some little distance, concealed by the intervening branches of the climbing plants and shrubs. Aurelian purposely detained her before each to give her time to recover her spirits, as well as to give the King the opportunity of watching her movements. The heart of Chlovis leapt with joy to see the gracious maiden in

all her beauty, slowly advancing, to listen to her praises of all she saw there, and her gratitude to him for gathering it together for her delight. 'O my Lord Aurelian, when shall I see him, that I may thank him in person?' she exclaimed, almost passionately.

'Thou seest him now, most beautiful virgin,' answered Aurelian, as they rounded the path and stood facing the King himself, standing near the fish pond. 'Come and tell him all thou hast been saying to me of him ever since we left Geneva.'

Chlotildis gazed, a blush rosy red suffusing her lovely face, at the handsome young man looking at her with eyes full of love and joy, beaming with delight, admiration, and worship. She clasped her hands towards him, and murmured rather than spoke, 'My lord the King!' and would have sunk on her knees at his feet, as if to supplicate his favour.

'Not so, beloved and fairest royal maiden,' said the King, advancing quickly, and taking her in his arms. 'Not so in my country, where women are our queens—our best-prized jewels. Thou most fair lily, and sweet rose. Nay, thou art my wedded wife, sweet. Thou wouldst not refuse to let me press thy chaste lips with one precious kiss? It is the seal of our compact, my beloved spouse. Is it the presence of Aurelian that discomferts thee? Nay, look, he is gone. He promised to remain if thou wert frightened of me; but thou art not frightened, my tender dove?'

'Oh, no—no,' she whispered, raising herself up from his breast, to which he had so closely pressed her, and looking with a sweet timid glance into his face. A well-pleased smile lit up her countenance as she met the noble loving eyes, questioning her as to the result of her inspection. She stole one arm round his neck, half frightened at her own action, and laid her head again on the strong breast, where a noble heart was beating with manly delight and strong protecting love, hiding her face, covered with blushes, in the folds of the tunic his sister Llantildis had worked with rare embroidery for this special occasion.

'Is this thy good aunt, the Countess Friedmunda, coming this way, my sweet one? I love her for all her love and tender care of thee. Wilt thou tell her so for me, most fair maiden?'

'You must tell her yourself, my lord. She understands the Roman tongue you speak so well. She will rejoice to hear your commendation from your own lips. She has been a very mother to me. Oh, my good lord, what frightful tale was that of which you first sent me word? It seemed enough, when I reflected on the dreadful fate which overtook my parents, to change my childhood into sudden womanhood.'

'Shall I avenge them, my beloved spouse?' asked the King, bending over her tenderly and imprinting his lips on her fair forehead. 'Thou knowest I laid my sword at thy feet for that purpose.'

'Oh no, no,' she answered, shuddering. 'There has been enough of bloodshed in that unhappy country, and that before my very eyes. Count Hagan, my uncle, ravaged and burnt the homes of the peaceful inhabitants in the name of my honoured father. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord,"' she murmured in a low voice to herself. 'Ah, my lord,' she continued, 'there is much disquiet in my poor country; but my uncle, the King Godegesil, will tell you more. Will you not be as a friend to him? He has been good to me, and right glad was I to reach his protection.'

'It shall be as thou wilt, my sweet love. But if I take not up the sword to avenge thy father and mother, I cannot draw the sword for aught else against thine uncle Gundovald, without breaking my faith.'

When Friedmunda saw the good understanding between husband and wife, she was discreet enough to be suddenly seized with a great admiration of flowers, and remained deep in their inspection at a convenient distance. When she found they were talking politics, however, she advanced, thinking a third person would not be much restraint on such a subject. Chlovis greeted her cordially, and asking her if it were the fashion in Burgundy for a nephew to kiss his aunt, he affectionately embraced her.

‘Fashion or no fashion,’ he said, laughing, ‘it is nevertheless a good fashion, is it not?’

‘Yes, my lord King,’ she answered, ‘when it comes from the heart, as I feel sure this did. With your good leave we will proceed now to the refectory-room. You will be glad of a horn of mead after your ride this morning. After dinner I am going to see the bees of which we hear such wonders.’

‘We will go round the farm if thou wilt, my sweet wife. Thou hast not seen it yet? No! thou didst keep for me the pleasure of showing it to thee. Or wert thou too busy thinking of me, perhaps,’ he insinuated, with a smile, ‘hoping I was not quite so frightful looking a creature as was Attila the Hun? What wouldst thou have said had I been such a ferocious looking animal as they say he was?’

Chlotildis looked up in his face and smiled. ‘Thou art glad I am not,’ he said. ‘So am I, for thy sweet sake, sweet love. They say women like beauty in all things, do they not? Come, thou must confess thou wert well pleased to see I was not a monster? Nay, I am not vain. I cannot help it if they think me handsome. I should not be my father’s son if I were not. “The handsome Childeric,” men used to call him.’

‘You would not be so handsome, my lord,’ answered Chlotildis, quickly, ‘if you had not a good and noble, kindly heart. The spirit that dwells within you speaks out in your face. Nothing dishonourable or ignoble can live behind such a gracious aspect as you wear, my lord. I doubt not the dread of your wrathful countenance troubles your enemies full sore, and the fear of your greatness causes the criminal to tremble; but I know the heart of the poor and needy and the captive must rejoice when they look upon your face as it is now, full of grace and mercy.’

‘Nay, now, flatterer! but it is so sweet to hear thee praise my face so prettily. Well, thou must help me keep it, as thou likest it best. The Archbishop did promise me thou shouldst be to me as a guardian angel, beloved. Say thou wilt teach me how to rule myself and all around me in the great kingdom of which he says thou art the foundation stone!’

The young Queen looked up into the loving eyes, bending down in such earnest prayerfulness to hers. Her heart leapt up within her in grateful praise to God, Who had chosen her to be the wife of such a King. She breathed a silent prayer for his speedy conversion to the true Faith, which alone could impart the graces that would fit him to be the ruler he desired. Her lovely eyes, in the midst of their smiling, suffused with the fervour of her heart and, overflowing the borders of their silken fringe, tears stole down her face. Chlovis stooped and kissed them off. 'May they always be tears of joy, sweet love,' he said, as he drew her closer to his breast.

As the afternoon wore on and evening approached, Soissons became all life and animation. Groups were gathered together in every available corner where a comfortable gossip could be carried on, and there they discussed the arrangements, the coming torchlight procession, and especially the weather. If it rained the next day, the marriage would take place in the Convent of our Lady, instead of the temporary building erected on purpose. And that would be a pity, especially after everything had arrived from Rheims requisite for the fittings for the high altar.

Towards eight o'clock the Frank guard passed out on their way to meet the bridal procession. Athanaric and Hermanfrid were both there, having ridden into Soissons the evening before, when the guard was relieved on their arrival at the Pfalzen Chlotildis.

'Well!' said the former. 'I made sure I should find Ethelbert here when we returned. He will miss all the wedding gaities, and, worse than all, the wedding feast.'

Even as he spoke, Ethelbert was entering the west gate of the city, greatly surprised to find Soissons in such a state of commotion. He had started for Rheims before the first visit of Aurelian to Geneva, and left before the news of the success of his embassy had arrived. But he had no time to ask questions of any of the crowd, for he caught sight of the Antrustion going up towards the palace, on his return from despatching the guard, and he hastened to overtake his chief and report his arrival.



‘By the hall of bright shields and all the fair Valkyriors, but I am right glad to see thee, valiant comrade. I feared the sword of that same traitor and miscreant had cut short the career of honour and glory I have predicted for thee. The King will rejoice to see thee, though he have not much leisure to listen to thy tale directly. It was but this morning he said it was strange there were no news of thee. It is something to be missed by the King, I can tell thee, and at such a moment as this.’

Ethelbert’s cheek flushed with pleasure, pardonable in so young a man, when he hears he has won the favourable notice of so renowned a leader. He seemed to tread on air as he walked alongside the Antrusion’s war horse, but it may be questioned whether the secret exultation of his heart was not more the result of his interview with the beautiful Iërne, the favour she had shown him, the hope that he was, even now, the theme of her secret thoughts. Pressing to his heart with joy the small crucifix she had worn on her beloved heart, he walked alongside the Antrusion, listening with amazement to Chararic’s marvellous account of the marriage about to take place next day, of the royal bride, of her near approach. Chararic recommended the young warrior, as soon as he had taken some refreshment, to ride out and join his comrades.

Ethelbert sped to his quarters, where one of his comrades, left with a few more for the necessary guard, volunteered to see to the equipment of his horse, whilst the others brought him bread and meat, and, what was more acceptable, a jug of mead of a quality reserved for particular occasions.

‘There, comrade, drink that,’ he said, as he presented him with a full horn. ‘They brew not such where thou comest from, to judge by thy relish for it.’

‘I confess to my standing in need of it, comrade. I have not tarried for much meat or drink on my way home.’

Whether the mead, so scarce with him of late, had refreshed his spirits, it was certain that when he withdrew the wrapper which covered the shield he now took from the chest, where he had placed it before his departure for Rheims, his heart beat

high as he looked upon the white ermine resting in the very heart of the gold cross. Proudly conscious that he was now the accepted servant of her whose pure symbol it was, he rode exultantly through the streets, devoutly hoping the time might not be so far remote in which he could bear it victoriously through the din of battle waged for her rescue. His thoughts were far away beneath the sacred oaks of the ancient forest, and he was hardly conscious of anything around him, yet as he passed on at a sharp trot to rejoin his comrades, chariot after chariot, full of ladies, passed him on their way to the appointed rendezvous from whence they were to start to meet the bride.

‘It is he of the white weasel, after all,’ said the woman who had noticed his new device on his way to the Field of Mars. She was standing with Myrrha, who, the toilet of the Princess finished, had hastened to take up a position where she could see somewhat of the procession.

‘Who did you say?’ asked Myrrha, in much trepidation, her heart beating with surprise and joy and bewilderment as she looked at Ethelbert speeding up the street, eagerly watching for his recognizing smile. But he did not see her, and passed on, unconscious even of her being there. Myrrha felt bitterly disappointed, but she comforted herself, thinking with joy that he had returned and opportunities would not be wanting where she might be more successful in attracting his notice.

It was not long before he sighted his comrades a short distance ahead of him. He soon joined their ranks, where a burst of hearty welcome greeted him. More than that, they drew their swords and clashed their shields, with a vigour only equalled by the way in which they shouted his name.

‘Where hast thou been, comrade? Better late than never! Welcome to the wedding feast!’ and many similar cries assailed him. Athanaric, taking possession of him as his own particular friend, swore by his sword he would not let him go till he had fully accounted for his absence.

‘Thou must content thyself with knowing that I went and came back, comrade, for it is beyond my power to tell thee

where I have been. There is a seal placed on my lips in that particular. But what are we halting here for ?'

'Merely because we are to go no farther. Nay, I can be as curt as thou art,' said Athanaric, pretending to be greatly affronted.

'I will tell thee,' said Hermanfrid. 'The escort now with the bridal train is to return when it reaches this point, and we are to take its place. How long it will be ere the Lord Aurelian and his party make their appearance transcends my powers of divination. What sayest thou to a sham fight in the meanwhile, and so to pass the time rationally,' saying which he poked his spear at Athanaric's ribs.

'Thou be quiet, Hermanfrid ; thou hast best. Thou wilt scandalize the holy Bishop and fright the bride into fits with thy Boersirkir propensities. A fit sight for the bridal train, to find us fighting like so many madmen as we should be.'

'Where is the Bishop, Athanaric ?' asked Ethelbert.

'Gone with the clergy to meet the bridal train farther on. It will be a rare show for the citizens. We are all to carry torches. They wont be up here awhile, for they are walking.'

'I was told we were to go out ten miles,' said Hermanfrid.

'And I know also who told thee. Thou hadst best take care,' said Athanaric, 'how thou goest too often to consult her. Though she may not possess the wisdom of the sorceress Thorgerd Hordabrud, thou mayest yet have to pay the wergeld King Marcomir paid—if not the sacrifice of thy eldest son, seeing that valuable is yet to come, yet something equally precious to thee.'

'Tut, comrade, no fear. Were my pſalzen once ready, I should take her to wife. I have, as thou knowest, two cows, four calves, a sow and her litter—a rare promise of hams for this winter.'

'Why, thou didst sell thy farm and all it contained, Hermanfrid, last Thor's day was a week, for something not so valuable as a pot of mead. Thou knowest better how to forge a sword and polish a helmet than to rear cows and swine. Nor was it ever thy calling to turn farmer or cure hams, unless it

be the hams of thine enemies. That thou canst carve a ham, and eat it too, we have ample proofs. And that salt ham engenders thirst thou also provest well.'

'Then thou shalt entertain me at thy farm, when thou hast one, and give me a horn of mead of the produce of thy bees when they are swarmed. Thou didst prefer money to land, so thou canst say nought.'

'Land is the future, whilst money is the present. Besides, I hate being dunned, if only for a denier and a halfpenny, the exact amount of the valuable treasure presented to the royal bride on her wedding morning. If she get not a better "morning gift," 'twill be a sorry prospect for her when she wants a warm kirtle for the winter.'

'We have fallen in with a pagan,<sup>1</sup> and have sent him to get us some mead,' said Hermangild, riding up. 'We are going to drink a waeshaël to thee, Ethelbert; come and join us, you three.'

Ethelbert could not refuse such a token of their goodwill, but when the ample provision was consumed, and a proposal made to send for more, he pleaded that he had some already before he rode out, and said he would go on a few steps to see if there were any signs of the bridal party.

'I hope there is no more forthcoming when that is gone,' he said to himself, as he rode on. 'Should the Lord Aurelian delay much longer, they will not be in the best condition to show off as an escort to a royal bride.'

A turn in the road brought him to a wide open space, where he could see to some distance. He halted under the trees growing there, and dismounting, passed the bridle of his horse over a low bough, and let the animal graze. The excitement of meeting his comrades over, he felt more tired than he expected, and lent against a tree, glad of the rest, and was soon lost in thought.

When he looked up again, the bright evening was declining into that purple hue in which tree and hill are so sharply defined in the clear yellow sky. There were hills in the

<sup>1</sup> Peasant, countryman.

distance to his left as he stood facing the east road, by which the expected party would advance. Stretching away from the foot of these hills, now growing darker and darker, lay a broad extent of barren heath, and farther up, to the extreme left, a broad dark lake, not fringed with bushes and overhung with trees, as was the heron's lake in its secluded valley, but a bare piece of water, as wild and desolate in appearance as the heath. It was no doubt because of the sterility of this tract of country that it had not yet been inclosed amongst the allods, but remained wild and waste, as if beyond the efforts of industry to redeem it.

As the shadows deepened into night, the lake, the heath, looked grim and still more grim. The eyes of Ethelbert seemed fascinated with its dreariness, so intently did they rest spellbound upon it. He gazed so long, that at length he began to fancy that shadows were moving across the heath, whilst others were emerging from the lake. At first he thought it could not be anything but an illusion of his fancy, excited as it had been by the strange scenes he had so lately witnessed. But soon he could no longer doubt their reality. Although a weird darkness hung over the heath and the lake, more like the darkness of a thin dry mist than that of approaching night, he could yet distinctly see all that was taking place. A long procession of white phantom-like forms were rising from the lake, whirling as they rose with wailing cries, wringing strange shapes in their hands, as they slowly alighted in the plain or hovered over the water like thin misshapen clouds. They were met on the plain by other forms equally weird and ghostly, assembling from all quarters. There seemed to glide amongst them the dread Valkyriors, tossing their arms, and waving torches, from whence came, instead of flame, eddies of luminous smoke, whilst they whirled around as if seeking the chosen dead amidst the unburied slain on the battlefield. There came the pale Hela, livid in hue, stern in countenance, followed by her ghastly court, leading the wild chase, the ghosts of those plunged in her drear abode. There Nidhogg trailed his horrid length, the dread serpent, the foul vampire

who banquets on the blood of corpses. There were the grey-mantled Norns, the three dread sisters, of stern, impassible countenances, armed with distaff, spindle, and scissors, ever spinning, ever cutting the life-thread of man. There came tall figures drawn in cars, stately to behold, pale and wan, driving a phantom team; the white cows of the awful Ceridwen, whose veil no mortal has ever been able to lift; or of Frigga, the spouse of Odin, who alone knows the destinies of men, coming slowly from the far-off lake in the holy island, where all the year round she has her abode. There, too, was the goat-drawn car in which sits Thor of the 'belt of strength, bearing in his powerful hand 'the skull-splitter,' whose swift vengeance descends on the head of wrongdoers. All seemed wild confusion, more kept crowding, though the heath seemed full, and in amongst them came thronging, pressing, indescribable forms of horror, creatures half wolves half men, howling in lycanthropic fury, pursuing shrieking ghosts. The heath teemed with these phantoms of death, as well as the sky above, where rode upon the clouds, themselves cloud-like in form, armed shapes of warlike deities; whilst from the lake, the never-ending procession rose ghastly, drear and dim. Ethelbert's blood seemed to freeze in his veins, the very beat of his heart to stand still, his hair to rise on end with a rigidity that made his brow ache. Suddenly all these wild shapes seemed thrown into the confusion of consternation. They appeared to rush towards the east part of the heath, more immediately in front of the horrified Ethelbert, who expected every moment to be enveloped in their midst. There they stood, swaying, tossing, waving their arms, now in defiance, now in despair, howling, shrieking. Then, as suddenly as they had rushed forward, so suddenly they turned and fled with long drawn out wails, and hollow lamentations, this time to vanish into the far west, leaving the lake, the heath, as lonely, as desolate, as when Ethelbert first saw it.

A light was breaking in the east, at first far off, but gradually drawing nearer, whilst solemn music floated onwards, wave upon wave, and chant of sacred hymn. Nearer they

came, the light growing brighter; the crucifix, with dazzling silver rays, led the way. Sacred banners floated behind, carried by two long files of white-robed priests, and then came the chariot—Chlovis riding on one side, Aurelian on the other—in which sat ‘the King’s daughter,’ in white woven with gold, before whose approach had fled the dark forms of ancient superstition to the everlasting realms of night, of ignorance. On she came, the bride of Chlovis, the great King, Chlotildis the Catholic Queen.

‘Ethelbert, Ethelbert! man, awake!’ shouted Athanaric, galloping up. ‘He is actually sleeping as he stands. Make haste! Here comes the Lord Aurelian and his train.’

‘I was not asleep, I have been wide awake the whole time, and have seen more than I should care to tell. I am scarce recovered from the horror of it now.’

‘Just hear him!’ retorted his comrade; ‘not asleep! That’s right—get thy horse, man! Thou wilt never get his bridle off the bough that way. Why, thou dreamest still! I should not have found thee but for thy white weasel shining out so brightly in the advancing light.’

‘Fall in, companions!’ said the captain of the escort, as the two friends trotted up. The troop drew up in two lines of single file on each side of the road, leaving room for the advancing procession to pass up between them.

The light of the numerous torches made the dark night so bright, that every Frank could see the young Queen as her car slowly advanced. Awed into silence as they had been by the sight of the priests, by the sound of swelling psalm and triumphant hymn, they no sooner saw her beautiful face, and the King they loved riding beside her, his martial features beaming with love and joy, bidding defiance to all the world, than these exciteable young men burst into an enthusiastic shout, drew their swords, clashed their shields, and filled the summer air with cries of exultation and rapturous welcome. When the procession had passed through the two lines they had formed, the Frank guard closed in behind, and followed in the rear.

Within a short distance of the city, the bridal train was met by the ladies in their chariots, headed by the Princess Llantildis. A goodly company they were, all the attendants carrying torches, whose bright light, falling on those they escorted, showed off to advantage their brilliant dresses, their sparkling jewels. Each chariot as it came up took a curve in the road, and turning round, led back towards the city; the chariot of the Princess this time following the others, and immediately in front of the clergy. The shout of the multitude as this dazzling pageant passed, almost drowned the music, the voices of the priests, swelling high notes of praise and thanksgiving. At the gates of the city, Chararic and all the officers of the guard and lords of the household met them and joined the procession, riding on each side of the ladies' chariots. When the head of the long line reached the gate of the Convent of our Lady, it halted, making room for the Queen's chariot to pass up. The King, hastily dismounting, assisted her to alight, and led her through the door of the convent, thrown wide to receive her, the Countess Friedmunda, and her ladies. Here, Remigius, who had not gone down to the pfalzen as reported, met her and welcomed her, leading her into the reception-room, the King, Aurelian, and her ladies following.

The next morning was as bright and fine as could be desired, and the crowd followed to the south field, where the building for the marriage ceremony was erected. The arrangements had been so well contrived, that the remotest person could see where the royal pair stood high up before the altar, and where Chlovis, under the direction of the Archbishop, placed the ring on the finger of the bride. Veneration for the holy rites kept the spectators silent all the time they lasted. When the religious ceremony was over, and the King and Queen returned to their seats on the dais, the popular enthusiasm broke forth again, and thunders of joyful acclamations rent the air.

The dinner hall, the same used for the festival of the Field of Mars, was fitted up with a splendour truly marvellous. The walls were hung with ancient tapestry, representing the deeds



of Odin and the celestial Æsir, curiously embroidered, and ornamented with bright shields and trophies of armour and banners. On the dais, under the canopy, sat the King and his royal bride, whilst the wedding feast went on, and the healths were drunk amidst the shouts of joy, the songs of the skalds, and hymns of 'hochzeit.'

And now drew on the hour for the bride to be carried in triumph to the palace of the King. Ethelbert and his three friends, advancing to the foot of the dais, took the King's shield, and inviting the royal bride to seat herself upon it, they raised her on their shoulders and bore her carefully along, followed on foot by all their companions in their brightest armour, clashing their shields and singing hymns in honour of Freja,<sup>2</sup> the goddess of love and happy marriages, she who possesses the necklace Brising, the influencer of hearts, the dispenser of graces; of Frigga the all-powerful, the great goddess, the all-fruitful mother, the giver of beautiful children, the beauteous presider over all happy households. Her uncle, King Godegesil, walked beside her on one side, and Aurelian on the other, whilst a number of her own friends and relations, present for the purpose, walked before her, carrying lights. The King, meanwhile, accompanied by the officers of his household, had gone round to the palace the other way, and was waiting to receive the bride on her arrival. In the inner court a halt took place, and Ethelbert and his companions carefully lowering their precious burden, King Godegesil took his niece up in his arms, and bore her over the threshold of the door. Giving her into the charge of the King, he said—

'I give her to thee, husbondi.<sup>3</sup> Mayest thou ever love her with the longing love that Frey, the beautiful son of Odin, bore for Gerda, the daughter of Gymnir the mountain giant, the most beautiful of all women. May she be to thee ever the chaste and loving husfreja,<sup>4</sup> mother of daughters as chaste, as beautiful as herself, of sons as fair, as valiant as thou.'

<sup>2</sup> Mallet, *North. Antiq.*

<sup>3</sup> Literally, house-dweller (Mallet, *North. Antiq.*).

<sup>4</sup> Housewife (*Ibid.*).

The ceremony of presenting the 'morning gift' took place next day in the same building where the marriage ceremonies had been celebrated. Under a canopy of cloth of gold, in the place where the high altar had stood the day before, sat the King and Queen enthroned in sight of all the shouting people, the steps of the dais covered with crimson tapestry, and strewn with flowers. The Queen wore a purple mantle over her white and gold dress, fastened with jewels, and on her head the crown of white lilies, the ancient and mystic emblem of the married state. On the steps below the King stood Aurelian, bearing a crimson silk cushion, on which was a gold crown with points of jewelled crosses and alternate fleur de lys set in pearl. Near him stood the Antrustion, Chilperic the Merovingian, Ragnacair, King of Cambrai, and the Angetraun, the 'intrusted,' from the districts they commanded on the frontiers. Immediately below the King sat the young Prince Theodoric, in his rainbow-coloured tunic and gold circlet binding his long beautiful hair. The Princess Llantildis sat beside the Countess Friedmunda on the dais the King and Queen had occupied the day before. Their ladies were near them, and the Queen's friends and the principal Gauls filled the arena of the building.

Strains of martial music were heard as six young men, headed by Ethelbert, appeared from the right of the platform, whilst six more, headed by Athanaric, appeared from the left. Both met at the foot of the steps of the platform in front of the Queen, to whom the King said—

'Behold, my Queen, thy "morning gift."<sup>5</sup> Would its value were double for thy sake. But if the gods grant me life, there shall not be wanting spoil of the enemy to lay at thy beauteous feet, to use at thy pleasure.'

At a sign from the King, the young men went up the steps, and kneeling, placed at the Queen's feet two gold basons filled with coin, two more filled with jewels. Then came silks of coloured hues, and stuffs of all descriptions; a goodly present, as Hermanfrid had predicted. When all these things were laid

<sup>5</sup> Morgen gab (Gibbon).

at her feet, and the bearers had retired, the young Prince rose, and receiving from the hands of an officer a golden distaff and spindle, he went up to the Queen, and kneeling at her feet, kissed the hem of her dress in token of filial submission, Chlotildis, much moved, bending over the boy in loving yearning. Presenting to her the implements of an industry in which queens and princesses were at that time the greatest adepts,<sup>6</sup> he said in a sweet earnest voice—

‘May it please you, royal lady and mother, to spin for your loving son a woollen tunic for the winter.’

The people shouted wildly at this touching speech and sight, and their shouts were redoubled when the Queen, lifting the young Prince up, folded him to her bosom and kissed his hair, his cheeks, his lips, her eyes moist with tears of emotion. The King was also much moved with this her public adoption of her step-son. He said a few words of grateful pleasure to her, and then turning to Aurelian, took the crown from off the cushion he held. The Queen rose, and descending a step or two, knelt before the King, whilst he, removing with one hand the coronet of white lilies, replaced it on her head with the gold and jewelled crown, saying in a loud clear voice in the Latin tongue—

‘Thus I acknowledge thee before all these chiefs and peoples as the chosen partner of my throne and state, and thus I crown thee Chlotildis, Queen-Consort of my new kingdom of France.’

A mighty shout went up from all present, and a clashing of shields on all sides, drowning the martial music. The King, raising the Queen by the hand, kissed her between the eyes, and assisted her to resume her seat.

<sup>6</sup> Mallet, *North. Antiq.*

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### *The Queen's Pantomime.*

THE marriage festivities were over, and the good city of Soissons had settled down to an undisturbed life of quiet, or as some said, of dulness. The royal pair were often absent from the city, spending many quiet and happy days down at the Pfalzen Chlotildis, a spot especially dear to the young Queen as the place where she had first seen her husband. Here her sweet nature, her discreet conduct, and intelligent conversation, endeared her ever more to the King, whose warlike temper she sweetened by her Christian meekness and forbearance. She farther gained his affection by making those things the subject of her conversation and praises in which she saw him take the greatest delight. His plan of settling his followers in allods of their own was especially commended by her, and she accompanied her royal spouse in a round of visits to the various districts under his sway, to inspect with him the new settlements. On all sides a fruitful harvest greeted her eyes, a source of so much gratitude to her, that in every town she visited she gave large offerings in money for the poor and the redemption of captives, and desired prayers to be put up for her, hoping that by the divine grace she might be enabled to bend her husband's heart to embrace the only true Faith, and give up his false gods.

Not thinking it right for the comfort either of his sister or of his followers, that so much time should be spent in a honeymoon seclusion in the Pfalzen Chlotildis, she often induced the King to return to Soissons. There she spent much time in fervent prayer and secret mortification in the

small oratory the King had prepared for her, and where Lupus offered the Divine Sacrifice daily in behalf of her pagan lord and King. As the autumn advanced, and the country assumed a more dreary aspect, the Court remained stationary at Soissons. Here began in earnest her new life. She seriously set herself to the rule and guidance of herself and all dependent on her. She never allowed her private devotions to become obtrusive to the King, but tempered everything with such sweet discretion that she was always able to fulfil the duties of her high station. Her ladies and attendants were devoted to her, so well did she know how to mix grace and sweetness with a strict enforcement of becoming decorum, and an industry in which she set the first example. The spinning and weaving went on without interruption at the appointed hours of the day. The winter tunic for the young Prince was the especial task of his new mother. During these occupations hymns and psalms were sung by herself or her cousins, or some Bible story of proud achievement or wonderful deliverance was narrated. Sometimes they told of the sweetness of the tender Ruth, of the beauty and meekness of Esther, of the warlike Gideon, the faithful Abraham, the triumphant Exodus from the slavery of Egypt, the song of Mary the sister of Moses, the triumph of Deborah. The King was often present at these recitations, and was wonderfully captivated by them. Though he liked to hear of Esther, to whom he compared the young Queen, ever ingratiating herself more and more in his royal favour, the deeds of war and triumph were more in his way. Barak pursuing Sisera, the valiant Maccabeus the deliverer of Israel, or the terrible Joshua commanding even the sun and moon to stand still till the enemies of God were destroyed, were themes more fitted to his warlike nature.

But what enchanted the King more was the quiet dignity with which she entertained his guests, charming the ambassadors, who now frequently came to seek his protection or form new alliances, with her grace and queenly bearing, seeking in all things to honour her royal spouse in the eyes of men, and yielding him at all times a most gentle obedience. Her

manner with the Princess Llantildis was that of a tender and affectionate sister, forbearing and mild, yet firm when she knew she was right. The haughty Merovingian was quite tamed and subdued, and the Queen became so endeared to her that she sought her company whenever Chlotildis was willing to admit her. The Franks were especially proud of their Queen, and from the Antrusion downwards they were devoted to her, heart and soul.

Though she was careful not to show for any a preference which could prove injurious, she could not help feeling more sympathy with Ethelbert than with his companions. The King had introduced him to her notice, and it was in her presence that he had related to Chlovis the result of his mission into Armorica. The King had told her of the secret he had surprised, of the young Frank's reverential worship of the beautiful Iërne, and this gave him a new interest in her eyes. The misfortunes of Iërne, the oppression of the Catholics in Armorica, moved her heart to pity.

'It seems so cruel, my lord,' she said to the King, 'to leave her to the tyranny of so stern and relentless a master. The rapture with which she received your message, and the tokens from the holy Archbishop, bear witness that her heart is so much with the Lord Christ that her present thralldom must be intolerable to her.'

'My hands are fettered, beloved, by the promise I made to my free companions, that I would refrain from anything that would interrupt the farming operations and the new settlements till they are well established. However, I must see what I can do when the spring comes round. Winter is not the time for expeditions of this sort, especially into Armorica. I must rescue her from her cruel bondage, as it is also that of her country.'

'Do, my good lord. It will be a most princely act to redeem her and her country from the thralldom of Satan, and restore them to the kingship and governance of Christ.'

'It shall be as thou willest, sweet. Thou wilt have patience in the meanwhile, not thinking that I forget thy gracious

prayer. Have entire trust and confidence in my love for thee ; all I can grant thee I will.'

The heart of the young Queen leapt for joy at these words, pronounced in such earnest tones. Fain would she have proffered to him a prayer, ever in her heart, often on her lips, yet still unspoken, for she felt the time had not yet come for the outpouring of the grace of God, which alone would render his conversion to the true Faith an object of his most earnest desire. She knew that she must pave the way for the realization of the one hope of her life, and quietly and prayerfully she set herself to the task so precious to her.

The approach of Christmas seemed to offer her an occasion which might, with the aid of Remigius and her confessor, be put to profitable account. This 'Jul or Yule' as they called it, the beginning of 'the circle,' was a time when the Franks usually kept the festival of the winter solstice, with feasting and much rioting. The Christian Queen took counsel with her spiritual advisers, and determined to give some entertainment, in which her heathen subjects could receive some idea of the birth of the Divine Light.

To the great delight of the ladies Julia and Marcia, it was decided that there should be some theatricals. The wooden building used for the wedding ceremonies was therefore walled in and otherwise rendered weather proof. It was fitted with seats, slightly rising one behind another, so that all could see. A portion of the building was shut off from the rest to form a stage ; and as the remainder was capable of holding a goodly number of spectators, all the Franks that could be spared from the different towns under their guard were invited to a spectacle especially got up for their more immediate benefit and teaching. A good many Gauls were also invited ; and when Christmas Eve arrived, the interior of the building was soon filled. The Queen and all the ladies of the Court, including the Princess Llantildis and the principal Gaulish ladies, sat on one side, beautifully dressed.

Remigius, in concert with the King, had spared no pains to give a fitting splendour to the sacred scenes to be displayed.

Artists had been sought far and near, some were even furnished from Rome, where these Mysteries, as they began to be called, were already in great vogue. At a given signal, the partition dividing the stage from the spectators was drawn completely on one side, and a room in the cottage of Nazareth was revealed, the Blessed Virgin kneeling there before a *prie-dieu*, her attention fixed on a book. She was wrapt in devout meditation, her face bowed on her chaste bosom, the golden brown hair escaping from beneath her white veil and falling over her shoulders in long silken curls. The light breaking in the distance advanced and filled the room, and the Archangel appeared, the mystic lily in his hand, stretched out towards the kneeling Virgin, whilst he delivered his marvellous message. Meekly she crossed her hands on her breast, and bowed her head in lowly humility, as she listened to the divine mandate. The mighty Archangel knelt in reverence to the sacred mystery thus accomplished, his glittering armour scarcely concealed by the folds of his ample robe of dazzling whiteness. His brow was bound with the heavenly diadem, on which was inscribed the awful Name of God. His snow-white wings were burnished with the hues of the peacock's feathers, as were the epaulets of his lorica, filling the room with a purple radiance. The beautiful dove, all the whiter from the blue light which radiated from its outstretched wings, hovered over the still kneeling Virgin, as she replied to the heavenly ambassador in those lowly words, expressive of her humility and resignation to the will of Him Who had seen fit to choose her for the Virgin Mother of His Divine Son.

Again the scene changed. Mary was seen faint and weary, leaning on the supporting arm of Joseph, coming 'with the whole world to be enrolled,' to the royal city of Bethlehem. Knocking at the door of the inn, they are refused admittance. The inn is full; the chambers teeming with guests are seen in the background. They are shown the way to the stable, the only shelter found for the Divine King and Lord of all the world, where fed the ox, the sheep, and an ass. The fields where the shepherds were tending their flocks stretched away



to the sides, and over them a heavenly light shone forth. The angel suddenly appeared, announcing the birth of the Saviour, Christ the Lord. Then the heavenly host, hovering, filled the sky, and the glorious hymn of that first Christmas morning burst forth, the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, sung by lovely voices, to the music of harps, quivering as if struck by unearthly fingers. The shepherds hasten to obey the angel, and coming to the manger, find Mary and Joseph, and the Infant 'wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' The angels hovered round the lowly palace of the King of Kings, singing praise and honour and glory for ever, till the Franks, wound up to a pitch of enthusiastic delight, could refrain no longer, but shouted with rapturous applause.

When the Epiphany came round there was another representation; the arrival of the three Kings, their adoration of the Infant King, and presentation to Him of gifts: gold for His Kingship, frankincense for His Priesthood, and myrrh for His Sacrifice. It was a beautiful scene of oriental strangeness. Real palm trees waved around, live camels carried the treasures, swarthy slaves in full Eastern costume crowded round their unwieldy charges, whilst the three Kings, Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspard, in royal mantles, knelt before the Divine Child, laying their crowns at His feet. Then came the dream of Joseph, the flight into Egypt, and the ruthless massacre of the Holy Innocents. When this dreadful scene took place, Herod sitting above with angry looks and furious words, inciting his soldiers to the awful deed, the shrieking mothers flying with their infants close pressed to their bosoms, the young Franks became uneasy and excited. But when they saw the soldiers of Herod, their swords reeking with blood, tear the screaming children from the mothers' arms, they became ungovernable, rose, drew their swords, shouting defiance, and would have sprung upon the scene to save and avenge, had not the partition been quickly closed, and their wrath allayed by this timely interposition.

Similar representations took place as the other Christian festivals came round, depicting the various incidents in the life

of our Lord, chosen by Remigius as best adapted to the end he had in view. The Franks were so pleased with these entertainments that they readily gave up all idea of the sword dance at the Field of Mars, preferring infinitely a grand new representation to be given every night in Holy Week. When these last touching scenes of the life of our Lord on earth, commencing with His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, culminated in the judgment scene and the Crucifixion on Calvary, the King, to whom the Queen was explaining each scene as it passed, when he heard it had all really taken place just as he saw it, waxed wrath, started up and drew his sword, exclaiming, 'Had I been present at the head of my valiant Franks, I would have avenged His injuries.'<sup>1</sup>

These entertainments seemed to have a wonderful effect upon Llantidis, softening her mood and inclining her to a most amiable frame of mind. At least so thought the King, though he was far from guessing the real motive which influenced her, and which was neither more nor less than a communication which Myrrha had made to her one morning in the early April. Brushing the long hair of the Princess, the Greek slave, full of her important topic, announced to her the arrival the evening before of a messenger from Prince Sigismar, still in Britain, to the King at Soissons.

'His Highness has been hunting all the winter,' she said, 'in the different places where he went to get the hounds for the Emperor, and now he is going on to Norway. He has sent to know whether my lord the King can send him a message as to the promise he had the goodness to make him, before he left his Court, and whether the obstacles to its accomplishment are in a fair way to be removed soon. He would be on his return through Gaul in September, he hoped, in case of a favourable answer. If not favourable, he would pass through the Hercynian forest to the shore of the Euxine, and so down through Thrace to Constantinople.'

'What promise?' asked the Princess, moved by the topic out of her usual reserve. 'Was it a verbal message?'

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon.

'Yes, thank goodness, or we should have known nothing about it. You see,' she continued, blushing a little, and with a slight confusion, either real or affected, 'the messenger is one of Prince Sigismer's train, whom I had asked, when he was here last year, a little about my country. He would not have told me his message now only that I was his countrywoman, and he begged me not to let any one know. But I could not help telling thee, gracious Princess, whom it concerns so nearly.'

'Concerns me?' said Llantildis, much discomposed and very angry.

Myrrha was piqued at the tone of her voice, and hesitated as to whether she should tell her more. Llantildis, however, had heard too much, and insisted on knowing all her slave could tell her in the matter.

'Can it be that thou knowest not, illustrious, that the Prince Sigismer asked my lord the King for thy hand in marriage before he left for Britain, and the King said he would sooner give thee to him than any man; but he was not free just then to choose?'

Llantildis did not speak for a few moments, she was utterly mute with the surprise and joy it was to learn the real sentiments of Prince Sigismer towards her. Absence and silence had worked marvels for him, and it was unfeigned joy to her to know the King's good disposition towards such an alliance. She guessed the obstacles which had prevented the possibility of a more favourable answer from the King at the time. But one of these obstacles was removed. Sigismund, the Burgundian, had been three months married to the Princess Ostrogotha, daughter by a former marriage to her great brother-in-law, Theodoric of Ravenna. As for Siegbert—how she loathed him! she would tell Chlovis she would never have him—the wretch who sought her merely for the position it would give him to be brother-in-law to so powerful a King as Chlovis, at a time too when she knew for certain he was still dreaming of the Armorican captive. But joyous as this news was to her, she was angry with Myrrha for tampering, as she called it, with

the messenger of the Prince. That anything relating to her should become a topic of gossip to slaves and messengers was galling to her nature.

'I tampered not with him,' said Myrrha, in a pet. 'He volunteered every word he spoke, and that, not by way of telling me any news about thee, but concerning myself—I mean himself,' she added, stammering confusedly, 'saying that he had no doubt he would soon be here again with the Prince, and then he could take any message I wished to send to Constantinople. He never thought his Higness' intentions in this matter were not known to all, and only on my surprise at his news implored me to secrecy. Had I known it would have offended thee, gracious Princess, I would have held my peace. I shall know how to be silent next time and keep things to myself. King Siegbert would have made it worth my while any time to speak a good word to thee in his favour, but that I scorned him and his presents, seeing thy dislike to him. He would have rewarded the messenger handsomely who had brought him the news that he was preferred to the handsome Sigismer whom he hates so cordially.'

'I wish no one in future, least of all thyself, to presume to meddle with things which concern me alone,' said the Princess, now thoroughly vexed and mortified to find herself and her feelings a matter of trade and speculation amongst persons she thoroughly despised. 'And if,' she said, 'I find thou hast busied thyself in any way interpreting my words or thoughts according to thy fancies, or in a manner favourable to hopes of reward from those who employed thee, I will have thee scourged without mercy. Let this be the last time I have to warn thee in this matter.'

Myrrha's heart heaved with hatred of the proud barbarian, who overlooked, in her contemptuous indifference for one so low in the social scale as her slave, how possible it was to make a dangerous enemy of the quick-witted, subtle Greek. She inwardly swore vengeance against her mistress, and vowed she would let no opportunity pass to spite her and upset all her best hopes.

For the present, however, any such laudable scheme was suddenly nipped in the bud. With unaccountable caprice, Llantildis not only departed that very afternoon for her pfalzen, but she also took Myrrha with her, so putting it out of her power to have any further confidential chat with the messenger of Prince Sigismer.

Another disappointment overtook Myrrha a little later, and that was the renewed disappearance of Ethelbert. Towards the beginning of May there were great preparations in the palace for the birth of a young prince. The King's pleasure was great at the prospect, and he could not refuse the young mother expectant anything she asked him. It was thus he consented at last to send Ethelbert again into Armorica to see how things were going on there, to carry hope and consolation to the Catholics, as well as to find out how far they might be inclined to aid him if he determined on measures to put an end to the oppression of Gwench'lan.

'Would they but give me some excuse for invasion,' said Chlovis to the Queen. 'It savours too much of personal interest to undertake an enterprize which might lead to war, having promised to maintain peace, unless urged to break it by some treaty of protection.'

'It need not be a warlike expedition, my lord—merely a mission of the Church to bear some comfort to the poor Catholics, oppressed even unto death by this dreadful man. I believe, from what he said in his last conference with me on this subject, that the pious Celsin would go on this mission with your good pleasure. Let it be entirely one of peace, as it would be one also of pious charity.'

'I should be right glad if he would, beloved. These Armoricans so hate us Franks that it is quite possible they might reject my aid with scorn, preferring even the tyranny of their oppressor to help from such a quarter. These Catholics all know the venerable Father well, and he might prevail with them where I could not. The valiant Ethelbert can go with the man of God. His presence might be of use to him.'

'And protection too, my good lord, as this country is in such a harassed state. It would be a source of great sorrow to me if aught befell Celsin in those wild regions on his mission of charity. The noble Ethelbert might take a comrade with him. They could travel as servants to the holy Father, and be a support to one another should that dreadful man get intelligence of his mission.'

'It is good counsel, beloved. The valiant Ethelbert shall go to Rheims and propose this to the venerable Father. On his return I shall be starting for Tours, and could take him in my train as far as that city. At Tours I shall entreat the holy Martin for thy sweet welfare in this thine approaching trial, and that our child may prove a valiant warrior like himself. It is to be a boy, dearest, is it not? Thence I shall proceed down the Loire, to inquire into these encroachments this Alaric is making on the Gaulic territory. Before long all the towns on his frontier will put themselves under my protection, and prove a great extension to my power. May I soon have the opportunity of inflicting on the inhospitable Alaric the chastisement due to his treachery to the suppliant Syagrius! The murder of the son of the great Euric raised a cry of horror against his murderer in all our ranks. Let him expect no mercy from my hands the day he is in my power! Thou shalt have a pfalzen at Toulouse, sweet love, grapes and oranges at thy feet, tribute from the sunny hills and vales of the Visigoth.'

'Nay, my lord,' implored the Queen, 'I pray you restrain your ardour for war. Strive to make terms with him befitting your greatness and magnanimity; but go not to war for the mere purpose of wresting his dominions from him. The blessing of God will not rest on such unrighteous dealing. War is dreadful, even as a righteous undertaking for the succour of the oppressed and injured.'

'Be it so, my Queen. I will regulate my wishes for thy sweet sake. I will keep peace with him if he will let me, since thou wilt it. If the holy Celsin does not object to travel in a warlike train, he also, with his two servants, can go as far as

Tours with me. Canst thou see my brave Franks in such a disguise?' he said, laughing.

It was thus that when Myrrha returned to the palace with her mistress, Ethelbert was already on his way to Tours. Arrived in that city and questioned by Celsin as to the fittest person to accompany them on their difficult mission, he named Athanaric at once as one he could fully trust on such an errand, as soon as he had convinced him of the importance of extreme caution.

He met him coming out of the church of St. Martin. It was thought right by all the immediate followers of the King to pay visits of devotion and honour to the great Saint, for whom their leader had such marked veneration.

'I have answered for thy discretion, comrade,' said Ethelbert to Athanaric. 'I know thou wilt not belie me in an expedition in which so much depends on entire self-control. Thou wilt yield implicit obedience to the holy monk, Celsin, wilt thou not? He knows how much better to manage these matters than ourselves.'

'I will do all thou sayest, comrade,' replied Athanaric, highly gratified to think his friend should place so much confidence in him. 'Thou art a right good fellow to trust me in this work. Thou must let me pledge to thee as my foster brother, then thou knowest I shall be sworn by my oath not to thwart thee in anything, or gainsay thee or overstep the caution thou requirest of me.'

'With all my heart,' said Ethelbert. 'I could not have a foster brother I prized more than thee, comrade. Let us go at once into the fields and swear eternal fealty to one another.'

Delighted with Ethelbert's ready acquiescence in his wish, Athanaric and his comrade sought a meadow not far distant from the city gates. 'Here are brave sods,'<sup>2</sup> said he, drawing his sword, and using it to cut out a sod, as he spoke.

'Now then,' said Ethelbert, who had followed his example, as we have neither cup nor drinking horn, we must use the second form of an oath; it is equally binding.'

<sup>2</sup> Mallet, *North. Antig.*

'Agreed!' said his friend, and placing the sods of grass on their heads, having removed their helmets for the purpose, they proceeded to prick their arms with their swords, besmearing these last with the blood that followed the incisions. Athanaric holding his sword with one hand, grasped the hand of Ethelbert with the other.

'I swear,' he said, 'by the rim of my shield, by the blade of my sword, and by the shoulder of my horse, eternal friendship to thee. In all things to seek to do thee service, even against my own interests, and to avenge thy death, if I survive thee but for a few moments.'

Ethelbert pronounced the same oath, which bound him heart and soul to his friend, now become, according to the custom of his country, his faithful foster brother.

'I am now bound to thee in every way,' said Athanaric, 'even to utter silence, all the easier to me that I know naught of their barbarous language.'

'Hard discipline for thee, I fear,' said Ethelbert, laughing. 'As there are large tracts of desolate land, I will loose thy tongue when none are near. Pity, should it grow to the roof of thy mouth through lack of exercise. We should lose many a biting jest and joyous repartee we could ill spare, were such a calamity to ensue.'



## CHAPTER XIX.

### *Siegbert of Cologne consults a Sorceress.*

THERE was mutiny beneath the sacred oaks of Armorica, rebellion against the chief of rebellion. He was not there; he was gone many miles distant, to quell what he called an insurrection of the Christian rebels, who were gathering once more around the sacred standard of the Cross. Under these consecrated oaks, whose thick foliage rustled in the summer breeze, sat half a dozen men in council, their faces scarcely to be distinguished in the obscurity of the dark and starless night. The religious awe in which these meetings were held, the dreadful prohibitions which secured them from the intrusion of any not especially convened to them, the certain death that overtook offenders, insured their immunity from surprise or treachery. The Druid who had conducted Ethelbert to the verge of the forest, and who had nearly paid with his life for that feat, seemed to be the leading spirit at this meeting, and most bitter against the man who would have sealed his lips for ever, but for the intervention of the influential men of his caste.

‘It is his successful recapture of the virgin priestess from the vaunted power of the Frank,’ said this man, ‘and his immunity, as yet, from any reprisal for that deed, which inspires him with the thought that he is all but omnipotent, rendering him insolent and overbearing. Such arrogance is hard enough to bear from a legitimate ruler, but it is intolerable when it comes from a stranger who has no more claim to supremacy than any of us; not so much as some——’

‘He is of royal race, notwithstanding,’ said another; ‘and though a native of the greater Britain, settled long enough amongst us to command our fealty, but for his arrogance.’

‘We can break his arrogance,’ said another, ‘and in no more effectual way than by giving up the Princess into the hands of the Frank as his lawful captive. I marvel much he hath not been to seek her himself ’ere this. He is not wont to be so tardy.’

‘I spoke to the Princess cautiously yesterday. She received the proposal with joy and gratitude,’ said one sitting lower down the council.

‘The Frank cannot protect her from her uncle,’ said the first speaker. ‘Gwench’lan took her from his guard once, and would again. Should we not then be in worse plight? Rather deliver her into the hands of Siegbert of Cologne. Gwench’lan would have to traverse the whole length of the Frankish territory to reach her in the Ripuarian Court——’

‘Siegbert of Cologne! I knew not he wished for her,’ said another of the council.

‘I know it,’ replied the first speaker. ‘He would give much to be possessed of her. There is an emissary of mine, trading along the north and north-east frontier now in cattle, now in divers wares. Twice has he been to Cologne, and each time has Siegbert sent for him, under pretext of chaffering for horses, but really to discover what he might concerning the Princess, and the means of getting her into his power.’

‘Thou hadst best not let the Princess hear of thy plans to intrust her to the safe keeping of Siegbert of Cologne. Rather would she divulge our schemes to her uncle, counting death preferable to the guardianship of the Ripuarian. I marvel to hear such a proposition from thy lips, knowing moreover, as thou dost, the motives which induce Siegbert to possess himself of her.’

‘It concerns me little who has her, so Gwench’lan lose her,’ replied the first speaker. ‘To deliver her over to Siegbert is the most effectual blow to the power and prestige of a man who counts us all, except a few of his intimate friends, but the stepping stones to his own exaltation. She would be more effectually lost to him for ever. Gwench’lan need not seek

her there as high priestess. She could never more stand on the steps of the high altar.'

'It is a monstrous proposition,' said the Druid, opposing the scheme to deliver Iërne to the tender mercies of Siegbert. 'I would rather kill her at once with my own hands. Nor will I consent to a council which betrays the innocent girl to such a fate. Moreover, have a care how ye act in such a matter. If this man Kian, or Gwench'lan, as he calls himself, be from the greater Britain, we may not so easily deprive him of power or prestige. The loss of his virgin priestess would not destroy his right to both.'

'And why not?' was exclaimed on all sides.

'For the reason that he is a native of the greater Britain, and in direct descent from the royal and priestly line. Much as I detest his insolence, I care not to lift hand or voice against a man consecrated by pure descent to the office he has assumed as his birthright. The purest blood of our ancient nation is to be found in that sacred island, the kist<sup>1</sup> in which are deposited the deeper mysteries of our ancient race. There is danger to all who meddle unadvisedly in this matter. Nor would the curse of the Divine Perfection fail to overtake us, should we work such a deadly wrong to the innocent orphan, she being also of the sacred and royal race from the greater Britain.'

The speaker rose as he spoke these fearless words, and would have left the council, but determined hands were on him, and long sacrificial knives were pointed at his throat. 'Death to the traitor!' shouted one. 'No! swear him to secrecy; his blood will betray us,' said another. 'Denounce him to Gwench'lan as a traitor!' cried a third. All was confusion and discord. Something like peace was restored after awhile, when it was decided that the culprit who had learnt their plans and refused to support them, should be kept under strong guard for the present, to be put to death secretly by themselves, or delivered over to Gwench'lan, as the occasion required.

<sup>1</sup> Chest, or Ark.

When the only one who had any compassion for the unfortunate Iërne, thus doomed to a fate she deemed worse than death, had been gagged and bound by these desperate men, and shut up for the moment in the secret cave, the council was resumed. Prompt action was decided as not only necessary for the success of their plans, but also for their own immediate safety. The resolution was unanimous that the trader in cattle should be immediately despatched to Cologne to sound Siegbert, and having ascertained in what manner he could forward their plans, to hurry him to immediate action. Iërne was to be kept in ignorance of these plans, and to believe herself given up into the power of Chlovis. No better proof could be given that the true spirit of their religion and caste had departed, and that it was only a lifeless corpse Gwench'lan was trying to reanimate, than the utter recklessness of these men for anything but their own selfish ends, their lack of reverence for all high and holy things, their lack of obedience to authority established by ancient tradition and custom, their lack of pity for the orphan, their lack of veneration for their own sworn oaths, for every virtue constituting the very essence of their religion, the inmost teaching of its dogmas.

The cattle trader reached Cologne on the very day on which Thornstein the Dane, cousin on the mother's side of King Siegbert, had arrived on a visit to him. The two cousins sat together at the upper end of the room, where the King's noisy retainers were amusing themselves with the elegant pastime of throwing at each other the bones they had picked of their meat during their dinner. This amusement was not unusual to them in the interval after their meals, as the grease on the walls, and the broken cornices of the beautiful marble pillars that adorned the room could well testify. The palace at Cologne, like that at Soissons, had once been a Roman villa, as elegant in its artistic details as it was convenient in its arrangements; but nothing could be in greater contrast to the careful and preservative efforts bestowed on the latter, than the neglect and wanton destruction of the former, unless it

were the still wider contrast, both in body and mind, of King Siegbert to his cousin the great Sicambrian.

‘Thou wilt not persuade me,’ said his cousin Thornstein to him, ‘but that this same cattle dealer is not sent on purpose to find out thy inclination in this matter. There may be some division amongst them—who knows? But what of that? All that concerns thee is to decide how far thou art prepared to meet them. What has thy cousin the King of Soissons to do with such a matter? Thou art willing to accept the charge of the girl, and they are willing to give her into thy charge. Set Chlovis at defiance, and act for thyself.’

‘It is well for thee to speak thus,’ answered Siegbert, ‘who art not in anywise within his reach, but for me it is another thing, being bound by alliance to serve him and do him no hurt. He has treated me vilely in this same alliance bond, making me pay full dearly for my revenge on the Morini. I did more than my share of the fighting, and he has taken more than his share of the tribute of cattle to himself! And he still delays to give me his sister to wife, as he more than half promised.’

‘Thou wilt not want her if thou canst secure this Armorican maiden for thyself. From all I hear, the fair Llantildis would scarce be an amiable companion in a house where another shares the honours and privileges with her.’

‘I care not for Llantildis,’ replied Siegbert; ‘nor, as much as I did, for her brother’s alliance.’

‘Strike a bold stroke then! Now he is at Tours, as thou tellest me, thou mightest get round to the north of Soissons, and back again, before he knows what thou art about. Once get the maiden safe here, thou canst keep her so for some time without his knowledge. An he came to know it, he might not then care. He may not want her for himself now he is married to a young and beautiful wife. Or is he tired of her already?’

‘Neither do I know, nor care. I wish thou wouldst see this cattle dealer and find out what is his real errand,’ said Siegbert. ‘They tell me he is here again.’

'I will. And now tell me, who canst thou count on amongst thy retainers to take part in this affair, where so much caution and prudence, and yet quick enterprise, is required?'

'On none, were any of them to suspect I was acting without the sanction of Chlovis. They would not care to be mixed up in an action he would resent as treachery. Were I to regain the maiden, I am bound by my oath to restore her to him, seeing she is his captive, having been stolen from him, not ransomed, though they were her own people who took her.'

'Thou speakest not sense now. By what law can he possibly expect her of thee? She is lost to him; and thou gettest her for thyself of them that stole her. All is fair in love, as in war. As for thy retainers, we can manage them. We can tell them thou art acting for the King of Soissons, but that secrecy and caution are necessary, so that the affair come not to the ears of the young Queen. The same excuse will serve for bringing her here instead of taking her to Soissons.'

'By the blade of my sword, thou art a right cunning counsellor, Thornstein. Such an idea would never have entered my dull pate. A whisper of such authority for our actions will silence all the guards and outposts we may meet on our return, and be a password wherever his sway extends. Our care is to avoid coming in contact with him. That would be certain discovery; I having no excuse for being within his territory.'

'We shall find excuses for that,' answered Thornstein. 'There is one thing we can do to ensure success in this.'

'What is that?' asked King Siegbert of his cousin.

'When bound on such an expedition as this,' he asked, 'in whom dost thou put thy trust?'

'I generally trust in mine own might and main,' replied Siegbert; 'I have always found that stand me in good stead.'

'Thou art wrong in doing this,' answered Thornstein. 'I would rather put my trust in one who has never deceived me. She is a most famous sorceress. In her I have always put my faith, and I will lead thee to her to-morrow. She dwells in the

forest not far from here. It is, indeed, to consult her, I will now confess to thee, that I come here now and then. We will depart early for the mansion of the mighty Helagerda, the bridler of death, after we have seen this same dealer. At present I counsel early sleep, so that we may be up betimes.'

Early next morning, the cattle dealer was summoned to a conference with the two cousins, or rather, with Thornstein, Siegbert having wisely put the affair altogether into his hands.

'I must tell thee,' he said to the cattle dealer, after some conversation with him, 'that such a deed as this cannot be undertaken lightly nor without substantial recompense. How much are thine employers prepared to pay for our services?'

The cattle dealer looked at Thornstein in amazement. King Siegbert had shown so much anxiety in his former inquiries that the emissary of the Armorican malcontents was quite unprepared for such a demand. He had almost expected to drive a bargain with Siegbert on his own account, so completely had the King of Cologne betrayed himself to him.

'I should have thought,' replied the man, 'the value of the prize would well repay the risk.'

'Now, by Odin, but thou errest strangely in this,' replied Thornstein. 'Dost thou reckon for nothing the wrath of her uncle if he discover our intentions before we can realize them; or the wrath of the King of Soissons if, instead of carrying her to his palace, where she is not beyond the reach of her uncle, as thou knowest well, we bring her to the safe keeping of the man who will defend her from him? Why didst thou not apply to the King of Soissons at once, before applying to us, but that thy chiefs thought to place her in our safer keeping?'

'I have no authority to make terms with any one in this matter,' answered the cattle dealer. 'It was not expected any reward would have been demanded.'

'Then thou hadst best return with all speed to those who sent thee, and tell them that we will undertake to place the Princess where her uncle will never see her again, if they will make it worth our while to go through with so perilous a task. Appoint some place where a messenger from us can meet thee.

If the terms they offer suit us, we will work in this directly ; if not, thou must seek tools for thy purpose elsewhere. Our messenger had better go with thee ; there will be less delay.'

'Thou wilt see now,' said Siegbert, who viewed with blank dismay the departure of the cattle dealer, 'in thy eagerness to drive what thou callest a sharp bargain, thou hast put an end to the affair altogether.'

'Never fear, man ; the higher we rate our services in this matter the more anxious they will be to secure them, and the more ready to meet us. Remember that we have not only to reach their frontier to receive her, but we have to bring her back. A little gold would smooth the way admirably, and they may as well pay the expenses as we. It would have been better to have made them bring her here. It is enough for them thou art willing to receive her.'

'I will trust no arm but my own in this affair,' said Siegbert. 'Let me but once get her into my hands, it will not be so easy to take her from me. Why dost thou not go with this man thyself, Thornstein, and drive the bargain at once ? I can be ready waiting not far off. The quicker we are about this the better.'

'It would not be a bad plan. We will arrange all this on our return from our interview with Helagerda the wise. It is time now to depart for her mansion.'

Soon after this the two cousins were riding through the forest, the deep shades and mossy paths of which were a pleasant change after the glare of their hurried ride through the open country. After some time spent in following the cuttings made by the woodman and foresters for the hunting, for which in years gone by the forest was famous, they came to a dense part of the wood, where the paths being narrower, they could no longer ride side by side.

'It is a likely place for a bear, or a wild boar,' said Siegbert. 'There might be some sport here in November.'

'No one ever hunts here now,' replied his cousin. 'The dread of the far famed Helagerda keeps this part of the forest sacred from hound or hunter. No mortal dare disturb her



seclusion with the noise of the chase. I would not give much of his chance of returning home. He were more like to be sent to join the night chase with the hounds of the pale Hela herself and her dread crew.'

'Now, by the wolf Fenrir, what is that blaze of light yonder?' exclaimed Siegbert, suddenly reining up his horse. 'May I die on the battlefield, and not in the depths of an unknown forest, a prey for wolves and screaming ravens!' And he could not repress an inward shudder, so completely had the dread of the supernatural common to all the northern worshippers of Odin and Thor taken possession of his mind.

'It is but the blaze of the sun in the glass<sup>2</sup> windows of the palace of Helagerda the wise,' replied his cousin. 'There it is, and there is the wise woman herself,' he continued, as they both came into a wide clearing. Standing in the entrance of a spacious mansion was a tall and stately woman, dressed in robes stiff with quaint embroidery, the folds reaching to her sandalled feet, whilst her rich purple cloak was fastened at the throat with a brooch set with costly jewels. Her long grey hair fell over her shoulders from beneath a circlet formed of a gold serpent, his tail in his mouth, with eyes of diamond, and wearing a crown of rubies, whilst one large emerald blazed in his forehead. She bore a peeled ash wand in her hand, encircled at the top with interlaced serpents like those on the caduceus of Hermes. These serpents were so cunningly manufactured as to appear at first sight to be really alive and in the act of flying at her who bore them, awed alone into quiescence by the glance of her eye.

'She was expecting us,' said Thornstein. 'Dismount and come with me. Thou must not speak all the time we are here. Lay thy present on the stool thou seest there; we must gain her favour thereby.<sup>3</sup> It will be a sign she listens to my prayer for thee, when she lets go that ring she holds in her hand, and that ring will bring thee good fortune.'

As the two neared the house, Siegbert saw through the windows a large hall, splendidly ornamented with gold and

<sup>2</sup> Mallet, *North. Antiq.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

silver, and all round<sup>4</sup> stood metal images, life size, of the gods of Valhalla. As soon as Thornstein approached the sorceress, he prostrated himself before her, whilst Siegbert placed his offering as directed on the stool.

Rising to his knees, Thornstein then began to pull at a ring she held in her hand, but he could not induce her to part with it. The more he pulled the faster she held it, and the serpents on her wand appeared, to the amazed eyes of Siegbert, to writhe and hiss, whilst all the jewels she wore seemed to burn with living fire. Thornstein, finding he could not obtain the ring, prostrated himself afresh, and signed to Siegbert to lay some other gift on the stool. Not being prepared for such an emergency, Siegbert had no other resource than to draw from his hand a valuable ring, which he laid down. Propitiated by the splendour of the gift, the 'bridler of death' relaxed her hold of the ring, and the overjoyed Thornstein obtained possession of it. Rising, he signed to Siegbert to follow him, and remounting his horse, rode away in silence, whilst the dread sorceress still stood in the entrance, but shrouded now from head to foot in a long grey mantle. Siegbert could not resist stealing a glance at her weird figure as he passed. He shivered with a cold shudder as he saw this impassible and shapeless object standing there as still as a crag of grey stone, which it also somewhat resembled.

'Thou didst never look behind thee!' exclaimed Thornstein, in horror, when Siegbert told him what he had seen. 'But take courage, man! as thou art a new comer and knowest not it is forbidden on pain of her wrath, she will forgive thee. There is the ring; mind thou keep it safe. It will insure thy success, and preserve thee from danger. Thou mayest now boldly undertake thy purposed enterprise. With that in thy possession thou mayest defy the world.'

It seemed as if the ring thus obtained from the sorceress actually possessed the virtue in which Thornstein firmly believed. Siegbert passed safely to the north of Soissons, and reached the Armorican frontier a little above the point indicated, without

<sup>4</sup> Mallet, *North. Antiq.*

any interruption. Making his way to the place of meeting, he there found Thornstein, who, in the dress of an Armorican trader, had preceded him with the cattle dealer, and had succeeded in driving a most propitious bargain with the conspirators.

‘Thou and thy retainers,’ Thornstein said to him, ‘must put on the dress of Armorican soldiers. We are to go farther south, and receive the Princess as if we were the escort appointed to conduct her in safety to a place in the forest near Dreux, where a grand festival of the sun is to be held next week. We are close upon the summer solstice; but thou art such a heathen, I should not wonder if thou hast altogether forgotten these things.’

‘South, near Dreux!’ exclaimed Siegbert, in dismay; ‘when thou knowest Chlovis is at Tours. Dost thou not see that it brings us right upon the road he will take for his return? What mad folly is this?’

‘And dost thou not see that as soon as we have the Princess safe in our hands, we can go which way we choose? My opinion is that we pass the frontier into Armorica as quickly as we can.’

Nor was this the only arrangement which fretted King Siegbert. When they arrived at the place where Ierne was to be delivered into their hands, they found her in a basterne drawn by two cows, the conveyance she always used in passing from one part of the country to the other.

‘Such slow-footed beasts,’ he said. ‘I will take them out and put horses in.’

‘Perhaps thou wouldst rather put her on thy horse and fly off with her, the whole pack of her countrymen at thy heels,’ said his cousin.

Siegbert again allowed Thornstein to overrule him—the only one who ever had any moral influence over him.

‘It is a pity none of us speak Armorican,’ said Thornstein. ‘Would that we were but once passed into Gaul!’

‘I shall go with you till you are past the frontiers,’ said the cattle dealer. ‘You need not be afraid to let the Princess hear

you speak your own tongue. She knows you are Franks, and believes you are sent by the King of Soissons. Do not undeceive her on that point, I warn you, or you had better kill her at once, as you value your own safety.'

'By Odin and Thor, I will kill the first man who attempts to touch her!' exclaimed Siegbert, his eyes flashing. He had contrived to take a look into the basterne, and the sight he had obtained of the Princess, despite her wraps and veils, had almost made him delirious with joy to have her at last in his sole possession.

Little did Iërne know who it was that rode close to the door of her covered chariot, his mind fully made up to fight to the very last ere such a prize should be wrested from him. Joy at the success, so far, of her escape from the dread power of her uncle, was checked by the fear lest her flight should be interrupted. She might perhaps, too, have been disappointed that she had not seen the earnest countenance and worshipping eyes of the young Frank who had knelt before her in the forest. She had not dared to look out of the basterne—but he must be there. Surely the King would have sent him for her, he who was the herald of this rescue. But she waited patiently, lest any imprudence of word or action might betray her flight.

So long as they were still within the Armorican territories they travelled with the slow and dignified steps befitting the progress of the high priestess, bound to hold a solemn festival of the dread mysteries. This so exasperated Siegbert that it required all the persuasive powers of his cousin Thornstein to pacify him and induce him to patience. It was well for them they had neither passed the frontier as soon as he wished, and not passed farther north, for they were met by one of the watchmen posted along the frontier by the conspirators to see that all was clear, who told them that the King of Soissons had passed Dreux and gone north. From all he could learn, he believed the King meant to return to Soissons by the north route.

'Oath and curse avail not, Siegbert, that I see,' said Thornstein. 'All we have to do is to take the southern road

through Paris. It will be a little longer, but once past Chalons we can cross the Eduan frontier and get beyond the guards and outposts. For my part I think it is a lucky thing to know where the King is.'

The worst of it was they were obliged to keep on their Armorican disguise. They had left their Gaulish dresses at the northern point where they had entered Armorica, and where they had meant to take them up again. They did not dare to stop and make purchases, lest it should attract attention and awaken suspicion. They determined, therefore, to travel by night only and lie close all day, a proceeding to which Siegbert strongly objected at first, but finding that they advanced as rapidly as was consistent with prudence, he allowed Thornstein to take the lead and direct the march. What would have been the fate of the beautiful Iërne but for Thornstein's restraining power over Siegbert it was not difficult to say. His own followers believed they were acting under the orders of the King of Soissons, and the behaviour of Siegbert to the fair captive was, perforce, of the most reverential kind that it was in his nature to practise.

'A little patience and self-control,' said Thornstein, 'and thou wilt bring this expedition to a successful issue. One word or action of disrespect to her until she is safe within thine own territories would bring us to a complete destruction, and that, thou well knowest, would come from thine own retainers, whom thou hast blinded to their risk and peril.'

## CHAPTER XX.

### *In the Cave of the Heron's Lake.*

PARIS was past, and the most difficult part of the journey lay before them. All along the Roman road they had now to follow, they would find the guards and outposts of Chlovis. Thornstein contrived to pass some of these in safety with half confidences and whispered allusions to the motives and secrecy of their actions. They would willingly have followed a less frequented road, but there was no other through the country, and it would be impossible to get the basterne through the woods, deserted lands, and rough fields to the south of the Paris road, or even along the banks of the Sequana. To add to their dilemma, the cows began to get footsore, and even Thornstein was obliged to confess that recourse must be had to horses. They might not take the horses from their own party. They wanted all their own numbers and strength to resist any interruption they might meet with in the neighbourhood in which they now found themselves. There was nothing for it but to return to the nearest town and purchase a couple of good stout horses. They could not help it, and they must account for their Armorican disguise as they best could, if any one challenged them.

‘There must be Armoricans about sometimes,’ said Thornstein, ‘and if they trade peaceably, I suppose there is no objection. I can speak a little Celtic, and those Gauls wont know the difference between my speech and my dress. Thou must come too, Siegbert; I do not stir a step without thee. Why shouldst thou want to remain sentimentalizing here? We can draw the basterne up behind the trees; two men are quite enough to leave on guard when it is so wholly concealed.

No! thou shalt not remain here. I do not care for thy promises, when a single cry or shriek from the Princess, were she to recognize thee, may bring a patrol of the guard or a passing Frank or Gaul upon us. Remember how the Armorican chiefs insisted on that point. Thou dost not wish the Princess to be lodged in any other palace than thine own? It is well! then, I pray thee, be ruled for thine own good.'

To Thornstein's great satisfaction, the ruins of an ancient building were discovered embedded among the trees. Into this the basterne was quickly drawn, and facility given to the Princess to alight if she chose. Thornstein, who was the usual spokesman to her, explained to her, as well as he could, in what their present dilemma consisted, and their urgent necessity for proceeding at once in search of horses. Two of the men would remain as guard over her, but if she refrained from straying beyond the building, she need not fear discovery. Thornstein's behaviour to her throughout the journey had been so thoroughly up to the part he played, that of the respectful agent of the King of Soissons, courteous and attentive to all her wishes, that she trusted him entirely, nor had the slightest suspicion arisen in her mind.

Thornstein and his cousin were so busy chaffering with a smith for a couple of horses he had succeeded in procuring for them, that they did not perceive two armed Franks riding up the street which led past the smithy. The moment these two horsemen caught sight of the Armoricans, as they supposed them, fully armed in the midst of a peaceful market place, they stopped short as if considering.

'What mischief doth this portend, Athanaric?' said one of them—no other than Ethelbert himself on his return with his foster brother from Tours, where they had resumed their arms, and where they had found a message from the King directing them to return straight to Soissons, where he would meet them. Celsin they had left at Tours, purposing to return to Rheims with a band of ecclesiastics preparing for that journey.

'It is strange,' replied his comrade; 'and by all the Valkyriors, here come two more bringing a pitcher of mead,

no doubt. They look as if they had been making free with it, too.'

'What can it mean?' repeated Ethelbert. 'They are not traders; no trader would go about armed. I have a great mind to go up and see a little what is their business.'

Suiting the word to the action, he rode up to the smithy, and bid the smith look at the shoe on his horse's foot, which he believed loose.

'No shoe loose,' replied the man; 'only a nail out. I will put it in for you directly, if you will wait.'

'If it is only a nail gone, I dare say it will last till my journey's end; I have no time to wait,' replied Ethelbert, whose quick eye had recognized the King of Cologne through his disguise, though of course he had failed to recognize Thornstein, whom he had never seen. Alarmed to see Siegbert in such a dress, he would have arrested him upon the spot, but for the small pretext for such violence. 'Come on, Athanaric,' he said to his friend; 'it is best for us to be moving forward.'

'We must give them a good start,' said Thornstein to his cousin, as the two young Franks rode away down the street. 'It would not do for them to see us following so closely; they might dodge us and watch our actions. I saw that fellow with the white weasel on his shield flush up to the roots of his hair when he saw thee.'

'We ought to hurry back,' said Siegbert; 'it could not have happened worse. That fellow with the white weasel is a minion of my precious cousin, and as sharp as the animal he has engraved on his shield. He is like enough to raise the whole line of guards on our road, if he suspects us. Let us make haste back.'

'Keep quiet, Siegbert; they will go quietly enough on their road, cogitating as to what we are about, till they are beyond our route, and arrive at Soissons. There they will tell the King who they have seen; that is, if they have any suspicion of us. We will steal back presently, when they have had time to pass our hiding place, put the horses in the basterne, and fly. It will be a risk to go now. They would



be sure to look back, and see us coming, and might plunge into the brushwood perhaps directly at the spot where the Princess lies hid. If our men only keep as close as we ordered them, there is not the least fear. As for the Princess, she is too afraid of meeting her uncle face to face even to leave the refuge of the basterne.'

Siegbert was obliged to give in, but it was with a very bad grace, and Thornstein had much difficulty in preventing him from galloping after Ethelbert and challenging him on the spot. The two Franks kept on their way, both fairly puzzled, for Ethelbert had told his friend it was Siegbert as soon as they were at a distance from the smithy. His heart misgave him. Siegbert! and in such a disguise! It could mean but one thing; he must be going, perhaps had been, into Armorica, and but for one purpose—to seize or entrap the person of the beautiful Iërne.

'By the rays of the glorious Balder!' he suddenly shouted, as he struck the spurs into his horse, 'but there is another.' And he started off full gallop in the direction of the ruined building. One of the men left in charge of Iërne, wearied with the long delay of his leaders, had ventured out of the brushwood to see if they were coming. Perceiving two men on horseback he thought he saw his party returning, but as they approached, and he discovered they were Franks fully armed, he darted back on the instant. But he was too late. Ethelbert had seen him and marked the spot where he disappeared, and, closely followed by Athanaric, he dashed into the brushwood after him.

'What does all this mean?' angrily asked Ethelbert, as, entering the ruined building, he collared the man, who had sought refuge there. 'Thou in disguise as an Armorican!' he continued, as he recognized the well known features of the man, with whom he had drank many a horn of mead when on expeditions together, or at Soissons when Seigbert and his followers were there.

'Oh, it is thou, comrade,' exclaimed the man in his turn, much relieved to find it was a friend who had surprised him,

and not a foe. 'Hush!' he said, cautiously; 'it is all right. She is there,' he added, pointing to the inner room of the building, 'and if Siegbert would only make haste with the horses we should get on with all speed to Cologne.'

'She! Whom? To Cologne! Tell me quick,' said Ethelbert, breathless with anxiety; 'is it the Armorican Princess?'

The man nodded mysteriously and winked. 'We have done the thing neatly enough, and King Chlovis cannot be too well pleased with us.'

'Chlovis! the King! I do not understand. Thou dost not mean to say thou art acting by the King's orders?'

'Siegbert told us so, or we never would have consented to the thing. By the hammer of Thor, he has never deceived us, the traitor?'

'He has, friend, and that most fearfully. But haste! there is no time to lose if thou wouldst redeem thy life from the wrath of Chlovis. Mount thy horse and fly straight as an arrow before thee. Rouse the guard at the next station. No, thou must not ride back. I know that station is nearer, but thou wouldst ride into the very jaws of Siegbert. Art thou alone on the watch? Where is thy comrade? Looking out farther up the road. We have no time to look after him. Athanaric, thou knowest the heron's lake? If we are hard pushed I will make for the cave. Keep with me till we reach it, then ride for thy life across the meadow land thou knowest of. Bring the Antrusion and some men with all speed to the valley. Wait a moment, comrade, till we all fly together. The noise of thy horse's hoofs might betray us too soon. Mount, Athanaric, and hold my horse.'

Throwing the reins to his friend, Ethelbert hurried into the inner room, where the trembling Ierne, frightened by the noise of the surprise and the earnest voices, sat listening in terror for the voice of her uncle. When she saw Ethelbert instead of the stern object of her dread, she stretched out both hands to him in speechless gratitude, her face radiant with the joy she felt.

‘Hasten, lady,’ he said, ‘thou art betrayed. Siegbert is the ruffian who has carried thee off. Come with me fearlessly. I will defend thee from him to the last drop of my blood.’

Ierne could hardly refrain from a cry of horror. Ethelbert caught up a mantle, and, wrapping it round her, carried her out of the ruin, his whole frame nerved with indignation and a fierce joy that he had come to her rescue, if it were only at the eleventh hour. Giving her to Athanaric to hold for an instant, he sprang into his saddle, and receiving his precious burden from his friend he placed her tenderly before him, bidding her clasp him firmly round the waist and allow nothing to relax her hold. How fast his heart beat when he felt those lovely arms clinging round him in such complete reliance! How it throbbed with joy, how his eye flashed, as, winding his way through the brushwood, he regained the road with his companions!

‘Fly!’ shouted Athanaric, ‘they come.’ Looking up the road he had seen in the distance a party of four horsemen advancing at a fast trot.

‘To the Antrusion, Athanaric,’ shouted Ethelbert, as the three started off at a headlong gallop, their horses snorting with the excitement of the wild race. ‘Straight, comrade; straight, for thy life,’ he shouted to Siegbert’s retainer. ‘Bring down the guard to meet them,’ he said, as they fled on.

Thornstein and his cousin could scarcely conceive what was the matter when they first caught sight of the flying party. The next moment the truth flashed upon them, and with loud cries and furious oaths they dashed off in full pursuit. The distance was well maintained by Ethelbert and his companions, and he began to think he might reach the next guard station, when all fear for the safety of Ierne would cease. But his horse began to feel his extra burden, and he felt he must relinquish the attempt and make for the heron’s valley. He almost feared he would not be able to reach even that, but making a call on his generous animal it answered him nobly. He gave a fresh start, and carried him to the entrance of the valley, where he stumbled and would have fallen, but that Ethelbert kept him up with a determined will and hand. Athanaric checked his horse, and

urged Ethelbert to take it and fly, but he said—‘Not for thy life! Lose not a moment; to the Antrusion with all speed.’ Dismounting he took Ierne again in his arms, and bore her with a stout heart up into the mouth of the cave. Here he shook the bronze gate which closed the entrance of the passage with the energy of despair, but he found it would not yield.

‘It is of no use,’ he said; ‘it is too strongly closed. Could I have borne thee in, lady, thou wouldst have been safe. As it is I must conceal thee as I best can. I myself will guard the entrance; fear not, they shall not pass except over my dead body. I may be able to keep them out till other succour arrive. It may be they do not find the cave, as few know of it save myself. Alas! that I should have taken such pains to secure that gate. Little did I know in what heavy need I should stand of its friendly opening.’

After a short search he found a small recess in the darkest corner of the cave. Wrapping Ierne closely up in her grey mantle he put her into it, and rolled two or three large stones in front of her, thus forming an excellent hiding place for the moment, though he well knew it could not long resist a close search. He then withdrew himself behind the jutting crag at the entrance, so as to give their pursuers no chance of discovering the cave by seeing him. Fortunately the sun was low down towards the horizon, and left the lower part of the cliff, where lay the entrance of the cave, in comparative darkness.

Siegbert and his companions were at first baffled by what seemed the dispersion of the party and the disappearance of two of the horsemen. They had seen that one of the two carried what they knew must be the Princess, and they strained every nerve to come up with him. In their eagerness they might have passed the narrow entrance to the valley without seeing it, had not the released horse of Ethelbert come flying out, wild with excitement, falling down when he reached the road.

‘He is unhorsed! hurrah!’ shouted Siegbert; ‘in for it!’ and he dashed into the valley, followed by Thornstein and his companions. Their wild career was suddenly stopped when,

after scouring round and round the lake, they saw not a vestige of the fugitives. Ethelbert heard their furious cries and oaths of execration, and his heart beat high with hope that they would not discover the hiding place to which he had carried his sacred treasure.

A loud shout, after a silence, which had made him hope they had left the valley, proclaimed to him that they had found the path leading to the cave, and had most likely seen the fresh footprint in the soft loose sand. Ethelbert grasped his francisque firmly in his hand, and prepared to give the first who entered a warm reception.

‘Courage, lady,’ he said in a low voice to Iërne; ‘the moment is come. I will delay them till help arrive. If I know Athanaric, he is even now not far distant on his return.’

‘Stand firm, valiant heart,’ she answered; ‘thine honour, as well as mine, is at stake.’

Ethelbert heard the scrambling of feet up the path, the stones rattling beneath them. The next moment the head of a horse passed the entrance of the cavern.

‘Fool!’ thought the young Frank, ‘to come up here on horseback. The dead body of his horse will be a barrier for us.’ Giving his francisque a swing, it descended full between the ears of the poor beast, who fell, with his rider, prone beneath the stunning blow.

Siegbert, for it was he, uttered a fierce imprecation. Caught by the leg under the fallen animal, he could not free himself, nor was he near enough to deliver a blow at his adversary, who now prepared to deal him one with the same ready weapon which had felled his horse. Had that blow reached him, Siegbert would never have troubled any one again, such determination now nerved the arm which swung the ponderous weapon. Unfortunately, as Ethelbert stepped forward to deliver it his foot slipped on a rolling stone, and he would have fallen with the impetus of the swing, had he not recovered himself with a strong effort.

This unlucky incident gave Thornstein time to come to the rescue of his cousin. He had been wise enough to dismount,

and pressing forward he stepped over the fallen horse, and, entering the cavern, encountered Ethelbert face to face.

And now began the ferocious onslaught of the true Boersirkirs. Thornstein uttering oaths and cries of defiance, Ethelbert, with his teeth strongly set, keeping a stern silence, knowing well that all his breath would be required to prolong the struggle. The Breton mace Thornstein wielded, though not so powerful a weapon as the francisque of Ethelbert, was more easily swung in a smaller space, and its blows rang fast on the shield of Ethelbert, dinting the white ermine with many a cut. Allowing his enemy to hammer away, and waiting his opportunity, Ethelbert delivered a blow which knocked the mace out of Thornstein's hand, and descending full weight on his knee, made him drop to the ground. It was only for an instant; unsheathing his sharp Breton sword, he rushed upon Ethelbert, who, dealing a second blow at his head as he advanced, laid him full length on the ground. Before Ethelbert could recover his francisque, one of Siegbert's retainers attacked him with his sword, whilst the other made strenuous efforts to free his master from the prostrate horse. Obligated to relinquish his francisque which had stood him in such good stead, Ethelbert drew the sword the King had given him for the very purpose of Iërne's rescue, and made short work of this new adversary, thrusting it into his throat as he advanced. Siegbert, now freed from the horse, attacked him on the other side with the fury of a she bear about to be robbed of her cubs. So fast and furious were his blows, that Ethelbert stood merely on the defensive, warding them off with his shield, or parrying them with his sword, anxious to prolong his own life till the Antrusion should arrive. In a moment of incaution, Siegbert gave him the opportunity of dealing him a vigorous downstroke with his well tempered weapon. It fell with such force, that it clove the shield of the King of Siegbert in two, and cut deeply into his hand. Furious with the blow, Siegbert rushed in on Ethelbert with a fierce oath. At this moment a bat—there were hundreds of them whirring madly round the combatants—roused by the noise of the strife, and adding to

the terror of the scene by their wild shrieks, dashed itself against Ethelbert. Blinded for an instant by its wings, he lost his guard, and the sword of Siegbert fell with fury on his shoulder, inflicting a deep wound. Staggered as he was with the blow, he would yet have stood firm, had not the man who had freed Siegbert from his fallen horse, seized the opportunity to rush in and stab him with his sword in the side. With a deep groan of despair, Ethelbert fell forward on his face at the feet of Siegbert. The King of Cologne, thinking to make sure of his fallen foe, stabbed at him with his sword. The point of the weapon, however, coming in contact with the belt King Chlovis had given to the young Frank, the sword was shivered up to the hilt.

‘Never mind,’ he said to his retainer, ‘he is safe enough. Let us search the cave for the maiden. She must be here, or he would never have fought so furiously. Curse the bats, and the darkness too! Would we had a torch here.’

‘I have her,’ shouted his companion, as he went behind the stones Ethelbert had piled up, and putting out his hand to feel the wall, encountered the form of poor Iërne. Fortunately for her, she had fainted with terror and exhaustion, and was equally ignorant of the fate of Ethelbert or her recapture by the King of Cologne.

Lifting her out with an exclamation of satisfaction, Siegbert proceeded to carry her out of the cave; not an easy matter where the ground was slippery with blood and encumbered with the fallen, if not with the dead. Thornstein groaned, but Siegbert never stopped to help him. Every moment was precious to him for his chance of escape with his recovered prize. Carrying her down the path, now a dead weight in his arms, so complete was her swoon, he found it difficult to mount the horse which his retainer fetched him from the place where it had strayed to graze.

Meanwhile, Athanaric had fled over the fields through which he and Ethelbert had reached the heron's lake the day they were sent to explore it. No impediment was allowed to stop his wild course, till reaching the top of the wall of Cæsar,

near the east guard, he leapt boldly down into the road, alighting almost close to the Antrusion, who, with the usual guard, was on the point of setting out for the rounds of the night. His amazement was great to find that it was Athanaric whose headlong race he had been watching with much anxiety, foreboding something wrong, if the news were not fatal, which winged a messenger with such haste.

'To the cave—to the heron's lake!' shouted Athanaric. 'Ethelbert sent me—the robber Siegbert—the Armorican Princess!' was all he could gasp out as he rose to his feet.

Chararic saw the emergency of the case from his manner. He stopped not to ask useless questions, but turned his horse's head instantly to take the road by which Athanaric had just come.

'Four with me!' he shouted to the guards. 'Rouse the east guard and come round by the Chalons road. Thou,' he said to another, 'will round for thy life to the Paris road station. Let them arrest all attempting to pass.' Then riding off to a place where the walls had been lowered by the stones falling out, he made his horse scramble up like a cat, and the next instant was flying across the fields, followed by the men he had summoned for that service.

One of the guard, who was to go round by the Chalons road, dismounted to shorten a stirrup. Athanaric shoved him aside without ceremony, leapt into the saddle, was up the wall where Chararic had passed, and half across the field, before the astonished owner of the horse which bore him had recovered his surprise. Chararic, whom he passed like lightning, shouted after him in vain. Athanaric rode as if he had been the wild night hunter himself. He knew, no one better, the mortal strait in which his foster brother might stand.

Scrambling down the cliff, his horse, wild with the race, yet surefooted as a mule, brought him into the heron's valley just in time to see the flying figure of Siegbert, the fainting Iërne in his arms.

'Turn, traitor and robber!' he shouted at the top of his voice, recognizing him by his Armorican dress. Then rushing



madly after him, he came close up with him just as he neared the outlet to the Paris road. He snatched at the bridle of Siegbert's horse with a mad determination to stop him. He clutched it close to the animal's mouth, and forced him back on his haunches. The horse reeled and fell over, just as Athanaric, relaxing the bridle, tore Iërne with one hand out of the grasp of Siegbert, whilst with the other he dealt the King of Cologne a heavy blow with his francisque. It glanced on his shield, and came down on his horse with a force that nearly unseated Athanaric. Recovering himself, he would have turned and fled with the recovered Princess, had not Siegbert, furious with this fresh onset, flown at him like a madman. Had he struck at Athanaric's horse, instead of the rider, and so brought the fight to more equal terms, it would have availed him more. Blinded with rage, he had not presence of mind to think of this, but rushed in on Athanaric, who, shortening the swing of his francisque, felled him to the ground with a blow on the head.

'Well done!' shouted Chararic, as he rode up. Being a heavier man than Athanaric, and not nerved with the same excitement with which Ethelbert's danger had inspired his friend, he had not been able to keep up with his mad career. Athanaric, turning to his captain, placed the inanimate form of Iërne in his arms, and with a heavy heart turned towards the cave, which Chararic now pointed out to him.

'He must be dead,' he thought, 'for Siegbert never would have been able to carry her off, and he still alive.'

Inwardly groaning, Athanaric dismounted, went up the path, and entered the cave. When he saw the prostrate bodies he said aloud, 'Thou hast done thy duty faithfully.' Then bending over his friend lying on his face, he listened to hear if he still breathed. Lifting him up with the greatest tenderness, he managed to turn him over on his side. This done he removed his helmet, unbound his shield, unbuckled his sword belt, and loosened his cloak. The blood still came from the wound in his side, so tearing Ethelbert's cloak into strips, he managed to staunch it and then bound it up as he best could. The wound in his shoulder he did not see till

afterwards. It gave him some comfort, in the midst of these sad offices, performed with tears rolling silently down, to find that Ethelbert still felt warm, and putting his hand on his heart, his own bounded with joy to find it still beat, though faintly.

‘It is not too late, I hope,’ said Chararic, as he entered the cave. He had transferred the Princess to the care of his followers, and they had carried her down to the margin of the lake, where they were busily pouring water on her face and dipping her hands into it, whilst one of them, taking a gourd from his pocket, poured a few drops of wine into her mouth, which he opened for the purpose, with all the tenderness of a woman.

‘I hope not, noble captain,’ said Athanaric, ‘but if it be, he has sent more than one before him to announce his approach to Valhalla.’

‘Thinkest thou we two could carry him down to the lake? A little air and cold water might revive him. No! do not go and fetch the water. It were best to carry him down, the cool night air will help us. I am glad thou art come, comrade,’ he continued, as one of the guards now entered the cavern. ‘Thou wilt help us. I think we can manage it now.’

Not unaccustomed to perform such offices for their wounded comrades after a fight, the three men raised Ethelbert carefully, and placing him on his shield, Athanaric bore his head, resting on his shoulders, Chararic his feet, whilst the new comer supported the shield beneath his body. They bore him thus easily down to the lake, not far from the place where Ierne, thanks to the solicitude of her careful nurses, had recovered so far as to be able to sit up.

As soon as she saw that those around her wore the Frank garb she felt she was safe. The valley was now full of armed men, arriving from all quarters, and she began to perceive that the rescue which Ethelbert expected had taken place.

But he, where was he, the faithful heart, the valiant defender of her life and honour? She rose wildly from the grass on which they had laid her, she looked eagerly into the

faces of those near her, and not seeing him she trembled with affright. 'Surely, surely,' she said, 'he is not dead!'

Though it was the Armorican tongue she spoke, they seemed to know what she meant, and looked round for Ethelbert, who they felt sure had been with her, how or for what reason they could not tell. Iërne saw the group round the young warrior now lying on the grass beside the lake, and hastened to the place where Athanaric was wetting his forehead with water, and Chararic and some of the other guards were performing the same office for his hands. Kneeling down beside him, she looked earnestly into his face, raised his head gently, and placed it on her knees.

'Who has any wine?' eagerly asked Athanaric, as he saw a favourable change in his foster brother's countenance at this moment. The gourd which had been used for Iërne was handed to him, and he carefully poured some of its contents down the throat of the friend he loved.

'Stand back, comrades, let him have air,' said the Antrusion. 'Here, some of you, go up yonder to the cave, and see who is lying there. If any breathe still, we may not leave them there to die. Carry any that are alive to the other side of the lake; don't bring them here. Some of you go round and look after King Siegbert, though he doesn't deserve it. Thou gavest him a knock on the head, comrade,' he said to Athanaric, 'he will not forget in a hurry.'

A few minutes after the Antrusion had thus cleared the space round Ethelbert, this last opened his eyes and met those of Iërne bending over him, eagerly questioning if he yet lived. The thrill of joy it was to see her near him gave him strength, for he spoke, though in a faint and hollow voice.

'Am I already in the halls of Valhalla? and thou, beautiful maiden, art thou the beloved Valkyrior who hast chosen me amongst the slain for thy eternal love?'

'Hush!' said Iërne, laying her slender fingers on his lips and pressing them gently with tender joy and gratitude that he still lived. She could not understand what he said, but she knew it was best for him to be silent.

'Not in Valhalla yet, my valiant comrade,' said Chararic; 'thanks be to Allfather Odin. But thou must obey the mandate of this maiden and keep silent. We will see now to the means of carrying thee to better quarters than this.'

Ethelbert had closed his eyes again, nor did he even seem conscious that it was the voice of his well-beloved captain who spoke to him. All speed was made to construct a litter of boughs, on which to carry him to the city. Iërne was to ride behind Chararic, whilst some of the guards were left to gather up the arms of Ethelbert, and bring away any of Siegbert's party who were still alive. Siegbert himself was recovering from the effects of Athanaric's blow, though so stunned and dazed he scarcely knew what had happened.

Before Iërne allowed herself to be placed in the charge of Chararic, she went to and fro on the borders of the lake, anxiously looking on the ground. She stooped suddenly, and gathered with great care a goodly number of the leaves of a small plant growing there, and which she recognized at a glance, skilled as she was in the art of healing and medicine, as were all the sacerdotal caste of the Armoricans. Carefully enwrapping them in a small linen cloth she drew from the folds of the serge robe she wore, she replaced the whole in her bosom. She was then lifted up behind Chararic, and fastened to his belt by a scarf passed round her. Riding thus beside the litter which bore the valiant warrior who had nearly paid with his life for her rescue from the hands of the brutal Siegbert, she listened eagerly for the moans and sighs which escaped his lips, welcome to her as the signs of increasing sensation, though each time she heard them they gave her a fresh pang as tokens of his sufferings. Tenderly and carefully as his comrades carried him, the Chalons road they were now following was not so smooth but that now and then there was a slight stumble, and an uneasy motion given to the litter, causing much suffering to the wounded warrior lying on it.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### *The Troth Plight.*

THE Antrusion had despatched a messenger to the Queen, to inform her of the rescue of the Armorican Princess. He was not surprised, therefore, to be met near the Chalons gate of the city by the Lord Chamberlain Bibrax. This last offered to Chararic the Queen's congratulations on so signal a success, and begged him, in her name, to bring not only the Princess to the palace, but also the young warrior who had so heroically defended her. She had despatched a chariot for the Princess, and a commodious litter for the wounded Ethelbert. Athanaric would not hear of his friend being moved again, till it was to his couch, and Iërne, as soon as she understood the matter, joined in the entreaty that he might not be disturbed.

'Think it not contempt in me, noble captain,' said Athanaric, 'that I refuse to let him be moved to the litter that illustrious lady has sent for his comfort, but his groans pierce my heart, and it is but a short way to the palace now.'

Chararic was touched by the young soldier's manly sorrow and devotion to his friend. Athanaric's voice was husky with emotion, and the perspiration stood in large beads on his forehead. The other bearers of the improvised litter had been changed twice, but he had refused to give up his share of the sad burden, though Ethelbert being tall and powerful was no light weight.

The Princess being transferred to the chariot, as the more decorous mode of entering the city, the mournful procession set out towards the palace, the townspeople flocking out to wonder and question. Before they had gone far on their way from the heron's lake, one of the guard sent by Chararic to the cave

had ridden up with the arms of Ethelbert, his shield bearing witness to the furious onset of Thornstein.

'Why it is the shield of the white weasel,' was the excited exclamation that ran along the line of eager citizens. 'What has happened? Is he dead? Look at the dints in his shield. No wonder he is lying on that litter; well if it be not his bier.'

A woman standing near the speaker gave a piercing shriek, and would have fallen but for the crowd around her. This new cause of excitement made the people press eagerly forward to the place where it had occurred. Two men lifted her up, and carried her out of the way of being hurt by the trampling of those anxious to see what had happened.

'Why it is Myrrha, the Greek slave,' said one who recognized her. 'What could make her faint and cry out like that? She must have been hurt by the people pressing on her.'

At the inner door of the palace the young Queen met Ierne, who hastened to throw herself on her knees before her. Chlotildis, murmuring prayers of gratitude, raised her from the ground, greeting her with a sisterly kiss, whilst tears of joy filled her eyes, as she pressed her affectionately to her heart.

'Come with me, sweet maiden,' she said, 'thou needest rest and refreshment. Come, whilst thy brave deliverer is being carried to the couch prepared for him with my own hands. As soon as he is ready for our ministrations, we shall go to him. Come, dearest sister, for so shalt thou be to me,' she continued, as Ierne cast a supplicating glance towards the litter, now being carried towards the chamber which the King occupied before his marriage, and where he had received Sigismer the night before the Mallum.

Ierne allowed herself to be led away by Chlotildis. The young Queen had spoken to her in Latin, which Ierne understood a little, having learnt to speak it during her short stay in the convent. Pacified by the assurance she should be allowed to dress the wounds of Ethelbert as soon as he was made ready, she obeyed the Queen, drank the wine which she poured out for her, and eat a mouthful for her satisfaction. More she

could not do. Her eyes were constantly turned to the door, expecting the summons she so anxiously desired.

When Leona, deputed for that summons, entered the room, she rose and followed her eagerly, accompanied by the Queen. Ethelbert lay on his couch, no longer insensible, but talking incoherently in a sort of continuous murmur. His expert nurses bathed his wounds with tepid water, and then the Queen, producing a box of ointment compounded in the convent at Geneva, gave it to Iërne, and exhorted her to apply it, as it possessed sovereign qualities. But the fair Armorican, producing her precious leaves, entreated Chlotildis to be allowed to use them, explaining as well as she could their efficacious virtues. Leona was despatched for a mortar, in which they were soon reduced to a pulp by Iërne, who would not allow any one but herself to touch them, lest their virtue should be destroyed. She applied this pulp to the wounds of her patient, binding them up skilfully and quickly. Chlotildis, watching the process with interest, happened to look up, and saw the lips of Iërne moving the whole time, as if in prayer, though she certainly might have been pronouncing a charm, as Leona afterwards suggested.

The next day at noon the King arrived. Much did he marvel to hear the wonderful news, and much did he speak in praise of his valiant Ethelbert. Nor was the conduct of Athanaric passed over in silence in the report of the Antrusion, nor the irresistible fury with which he attacked Siegbert and rescued the Princess.

‘Let Siegbert know,’ said the King, ‘that he is to depart as soon as he can be removed to his own dominions, and let him keep there if he wishes me to forget his treachery. I might punish him severely for it but that he is already punished, and, after all, what he has done frees me from my word to him. Let him take his friend and cousin with him. Let me never meet or hear of this last again.’

The King insisted on Athanaric’s retiring to rest for a few hours. ‘Nay, comrade,’ he said, ‘thou art not afraid of neglect of thy foster brother in thine absence. I hope to prove as

faithful a guard as thyself. And here comes our beloved lady and Queen to aid me, and, by my sword, our lovely captive. These are physicians and nurses of the right sort for a wounded soldier, comrade !'

He rose to meet the Queen and Iërne, who saw him now for the first time since her rescue from King Siegbert. She hastened to meet him, threw herself on her knees before him, and kissed his feet before he could prevent her, watering them with her tears.

'Nay, fair maiden,' he said, raising her from the ground, 'not at my feet ; but with the good leave of my sweet wife, our greeting shall be thus,' he said, looking at the Queen as he spoke, and pressing his lips on the forehead of Iërne.

The Queen smiled, well pleased to notice the heartfelt joy of her lord thus expressed. Passing near him, she laid her hand on the King's arm, with a sweet smile in her loving eyes, and Chlovis, putting his arm around her, drew her near to him, and kissed her fair lips.

These were the nurses who struggled with death for the possession of their beloved hero. The King sat with him several hours by day, Athanaric never left him at night. Chlotildis and Iërne tended him, dressed his wounds, gave him his food and medicine. In a few days, these duties devolved on Iërne alone, for the time was now approaching for the Queen to present her husband with an heir, and the young Prince Theodoric with the brother she had promised him.

The Queen's uncle, Count Hagan, had arrived, to be present at the birth of the expected heir, in the direct line, to the throne of Burgundy, whilst Chilperic the Merovingian, Ragnacair of Cambay, and several other chiefs, relations, or allies of Chlovis, arrived to be present on the joyful occasion, and witness the ceremony of recognition.

Scarcely a week after the return of the King to Soissons, it was known throughout the palace that a young Prince was born. Great was the joy and gratitude of the young mother, and great the excitement of all concerned. Chilperic the Merovingian and the Count Hagan, waiting in an outer



room, received the child from the hands of the Countess Friedmunda, who had arrived to perform the part of mother to the young Queen on this happy occasion. Hagan, taking the infant in his arms, returned, accompanied by Chilperic, into the room where Chlovis, surrounded by his chiefs and officers, awaited his arrival. Hagan presented the child to his father, who took it in his arms,<sup>1</sup> and dipping the fingers of his right hand into a bowl of water presented to him by Ragnacair, the King sprinkled it in the child's face, saying—

‘Ingomer, son of Chlovis, son of Childeric, son of Clodion, son of Merovæus, I acknowledge thee as my son, and coheir of all my power, dignity, and station, with Theodoric, heretofore my only son.’ A great clashing of arms succeeded these words, with many assenting cries of ‘Ja wohl! ja wohl!’

‘And I,’ said the Count Hagan, taking the child in his arms, ‘present to you, chiefs of the Sali, Ingomer, son of Chlotildis of Burgundy, daughter of the murdered Chilperic, as the rightful heir to the throne of Burgundy, now usurped by the traitor Gundovald.’

A great clashing of arms succeeded this speech also, delivered by Count Hagan in the language of the Franks, he having learnt by heart the sentence for the occasion.

Whether this sprinkling of the child with water by his father was considered as a sort of baptism among the Franks, or was merely usual with the ceremony of acknowledgment, which established a child's right to the inheritance of his father, Christian Baptism was administered to the infant Prince a few hours afterwards, in the Queen's oratory, by the priest Lupus, as it had been agreed at her marriage that all her children should be baptized into the Holy Catholic Faith.

But the rejoicings for the birth of the young Prince were suddenly changed into mourning. He was scarcely four days old when he began to droop, and before he had worn his baptismal robe a week he expired. This was a terrible grief, both to the King and the Queen, and a great trial to the latter, to whom the King had said in the first burst of his sorrow and

<sup>1</sup> Mallet, *North. Antiq.*

disappointment—‘If he had been consecrated in the name of my gods he had not died, but having been baptized in the name of thine he could not live.’

This was a terrible blow to Chlotildis, whose hopes of seeing the King soon conform to the Faith in which, to her, eternal salvation was alone to be found, were, she feared, if not dashed to the ground, yet as far removed as ever by this most untoward event.

‘Oh, say not so, my lord,’ she said imploringly. ‘Rather let me thank God, Who has thought me worthy of bearing a child whom He has called to His Kingdom.’<sup>2</sup>

The death of the young Prince was a general disappointment, and not a few shook their heads ominously amongst the Franks; and if the King’s words were not repeated by them aloud, many thought them.

Llantildis had felt the death of the young King of Burgundy, as the people had styled him, very acutely. It must be said for her, that sorrow for the young mother’s grief and for the King’s disappointment had been uppermost. Still, her own was bitter enough. It would have gratified her self-esteem to have seen the man, for whose wife she had not been reckoned worthy, deprived of his honours, no longer heir to a great kingdom, but set aside as an interloper, and his throne transferred to the rightful heir, ruled over during the young King’s minority by her brother, who had sought that alliance for her vainly; and all this was now overthrown by the untoward death of the infant in whom her hopes centred.

Nor did she approve of the new state of things which she found established in the palace on her return from her pfalzen. From the very first day she had taken a dislike to the Princess Iërne. She was vexed to see the affectionate solicitude of both the King and the Queen for her, and resented it all the more that she was the heroine of the hour, surrounded with a halo of interest and devotion. And she was out of all patience that so much favour and distinction should be lavished on Ethelbert.

<sup>2</sup> Alban Butler, *Life of St. Chlotildis*.

She had taken pride in being on friendly and most affectionate terms with her brother's wife, partly because the young Queen had won her with her sweet, gentle forbearance, and partly because she was determined to show Chlovis that she was not jealous of her. And then she was awed more than she would have chosen to confess, by the presence in the palace of the priest Lupus, whose kind but reserved manner was something so new to her. She had even paid him the most reverential attention, and looked upon him as something supernatural. Now, to her great disgust, she found even his interest absorbed in this marvellous new inmate of the palace. He had heard much of the fair Armorican from the young Queen, and hoped, when her absorbing care was no longer demanded by the critical position of her brave defender, to be able, with the assistance of Chlotildis, to complete the good work begun in the Convent of our Lady, and confirm her in the true Faith.

Ethelbert had so far improved in health and strength under the care of his devoted nurses, that the King thought preparations might now be made for the ceremony of investing the two young friends with the chain of valour. The ceremony was to take place in the Field of Mars, and all possible splendour was to be given to it, in order to honour the two valiant youths in the sight of their comrades. He thought also of bestowing a higher reward on Ethelbert, no less than the hand of the beautiful Armorican, for whom, as the King well knew, he had so long entertained a secret affection.

He was alone with his wife in the room which the young Queen had devoted to the labours of herself and ladies, inspecting at her desire the two new cloaks of white samite and the purple tunics she had embroidered with strange forms of gold dragons and mystic devices, as her present to the men whom 'the King delighted to honour.' After expressing his approbation of her gifts, Chlovis said, 'What thinkest thou, my Queen, of a marriage for thy young charge, my beautiful captive? Thou knowest Ethelbert is of noble lineage, and if the fortune of war allow him to reach the fitting age, I shall

some day bestow on him the rank and dignity of Antrusion, the highest reward of valour.'

'There would be no fitter match, my dear lord,' replied the Queen; 'and well does the noble Ethelbert deserve the hand of the fair maiden whom he rescued. But I fear,' she continued, lowering her voice to a still sweeter tone, as if in deprecation of his disappointment, 'I fear the obstacle to the realization of your wishes will come from the maiden herself.'

'How so, my beloved? Surely the youth is engaging in countenance, and valiant enough to gain the heart of a noble maiden.'

'And he has gained her heart, my dear lord. At least, she loves him with an affection more tender than that of a sister for a beloved brother. She confessed as much to me, one day that his fever wanderings betrayed his secret to us, as we watched him in the absence of his friend. But at the same time she told me, the tears coursing the while down her pale face, that she never could become his wife. She felt how worthy he was of all she could do for him, but she was restrained by a vow she had made to consecrate her life to the service of God in retirement.'

'By the holy Martin of Tours! but she was rash to do so,' replied the King, with great vexation; 'she had no right so to dispose of herself without my consent, she being my captive.'

'Nay, my dearest lord; let me deprecate your anger. The maiden offered up her vow at the moment she laid the first dressing on the wounds of her noble warrior. I saw her lips move at the time, and thought that, being a priestess in her own country, she was perchance muttering some charm. But it was at that moment she offered her whole life to God, would He but graciously preserve to the noble youth the life he had well nigh lost to redeem her from the hands of cruel men.'

'By the edge of my sword, but she shall be released from her vow! Nay, my love,' he said, seeing the young Queen shake her head; 'thou wert released from thy vow, by the holy Avitus, for my sake.'

‘Dear my lord, there was no vow with me, as the holy Avitus bore witness. But here there is a vow, voluntarily offered to obtain a merciful boon, more highly prized than her own happiness. For I feel sure that even then she loved the youth dearly.’

‘And will she sacrifice her own happiness and his for such a shadow?’

‘O my good lord, if it were no sacrifice where would be the value of the offering? I pray you, suffer the maiden to fulfil her vow. I feel sure the noble Ethelbert will be the first to join me in this prayer when he learns at what a cost she has purchased his life. Were this vow infringed by either, there would be a loss of esteem which no happiness could repay.’

‘Now, by the holy Martin of Tours, but she shall tell him of this absurd vow herself. If he submit to it, why I suppose it must be respected. But now promise me thou wilt not see the youth before the interview takes place. I know not how it is, but thou hast a most fatal power, a fascination which enables thee to bend all to thy influence, and make every one see things in the light thou dost. I have a mind to have thee burnt as a sorceress. I have no will of my own when thou chooseth to pray me to give it up. Nay, be not frightened, my own sweet dove! I know it is because thy thoughts are always set right, and so all thy words and actions become so. Go thou and prepare this rash maiden to explain the motive of her conduct to the noble Ethelbert, this very afternoon. He shall no longer be kept in ignorance of it. As he determines, so shall it be. He has merited so much at my hands, both by his valour and his discretion.’

Ethelbert was certainly gaining strength every day. He had been out on horseback, to the intense satisfaction of his comrades. But it was not much he could do as yet, his face was still pallid and his eyes looked larger, darker, and more earnest than ever. He lost nothing in the good graces of the fairer sex by these outward tokens of all he had suffered to rescue the beautiful Princess. Even as he entered the room where, in accordance with the King’s order, Ierne awaited him,

she felt her heart smite her, as she looked on his wan features and knew it was for her rescue he had paid so dearly.

He would have gone down on his knees before her, but that he failed in the attempt, and Iërne, hastening to meet him, caught him by the arm and made him sit down. She stood beside him, looking into his wondering eyes, the unshed tears filling her own.

‘I had hoped thou wouldst have proved stronger by this time,’ she said to him, in her own soft language, so soft from her lips, so full in her low, rich voice. ‘I fear thou art not strong enough for this interview, which takes place at the command of the King my lord.’

‘I am strong enough for any commands from you, illustrious lady. I have long vowed myself to your service. Would that I were more worthy of such high service.’

‘More worthy, noble youth? It is I who am not worthy of such service as thine. Hadst thou died for my sake, as I feared at one time thou wouldst, there would have been nothing left in life for the wretched Iërne but to mourn the loss of so true, so great a heart. It is true, noble youth,’ she said, as Ethelbert looked with reverent devotion into her face, on which he could read, in its passionate expression, the truth of the words he could hardly believe he had heard aright.

‘Yes, Ethelbert,’ she continued, ‘thy life is dearer to me than my own. So dear, that when thou didst lie wounded almost to death for my sake, I offered my life for thine to the God of the Catholic Church. Having received the priceless boon I implored at His merciful hands, shall I not pay my vow to consecrate my whole life to Him in holy retirement?’

‘You did, illustrious lady? You thought me worthy of such high favour? I cannot speak,’ he said, concealing his face in his hands, but not the tears, wrung from him in his weakened state by the overwhelming joy of being held worthy by her of such esteem.

‘Dost thou comprehend, most dear and valiant youth, all this vow implies?’

‘Not your death, lady? Oh, say it is not that!’ he implored, with eager eyes raised to her.

‘No; not my death in the one sense thou fearest, noble Ethelbert: but my death to all that is held most dear in this world. By consecrating my life in this manner, I put it beyond my power ever to share the highest human joys, ever to fulfil the wishes of the King my lord, who designed to give me—to thee.’

‘The King? did he wish? did he mean it? Oh, no, no; believe me, most illustrious lady, I never dared to hope for such high reward. That I had dared to love you with a worship which makes all other women as mere shadows to me, I confess with deep humility. But I never dared to raise my aspirations to such an audacious height. To be allowed to reverence you at a distance, to think of you as the one guiding star of all my actions, to be called your warrior, to be your servant, to be allowed to bear your beloved symbol on my shield, to shout your beloved name in the thickest of the fight, is all, all I ever dared to hope.’

It was now the turn for Ierne’s tears to fall in a raining shower from her eyes. She looked into his face, as if in homage to his noble spirit, and said to him, as soon as she could command her voice—

‘And so it shall be, beloved youth. Thou shalt be all this to me. Thou shalt love me all thy life. And I, in the depths of the holy House of Refuge, where the rest of my life will be spent, will offer up my prayers daily, hourly, for thy welfare and thy honour. And thou shalt live for me, knowing that nothing can be more dear to me than thyself. Thou shalt live to devote thyself to my unhappy country. Would my best heart’s blood could redeem her from the tyranny and oppression of a cruel worship and restore her to the pure Faith she once enjoyed!’

In the enthusiasm excited in his heart by her words and manner, Ethelbert sank on his knees at her feet, and taking up the hem of her robe, kissed it reverently, and drawing his sword, kissed the blade, laying it at her feet, and swearing by

the blade, the point, the hilt, to devote himself and it to the rescue of her country from its cruel enemy and hers.

‘Where is thy cross, my Ethelbert, which I gave to thee in the forest? See, I will change again with thee, if thou wilt. Shall it be so?’ she asked, drawing from its place of concealment on her heart the crucifix which Remigius had sent her by his hands. This she now put round the neck of the still kneeling Ethelbert, receiving from him the cross he had ever worn since that day when he knelt at her feet in the far off woods of Armorica. Putting it round her own neck, she insisted on his rising, and made him again sit down. Bending over him, she pressed her lips on his pale forehead.

‘And thus,’ she said, ‘I seal thee mine for ever! Thou must become a Catholic, as well as myself, and some day, most noble and most beloved youth, we shall meet in a brighter world, where there will be no more parting.’

Chlovis, who, unseen by them, had witnessed this interview, though he could not understand their words, could yet interpret their actions. He could scarcely believe it possible, so unearthly, so spiritual a love could exist between a youth and maiden so passionately attached to one another.

‘By the holy Martin of Tours, but it passes my comprehension!’ he said to the Queen. ‘I don’t believe they know their own minds. But I suppose I must keep my word; though, by the blade of my sword, it is the greatest absurdity that ever came to my knowledge. Well, well, my fairest, thou shalt not plead in vain. But she must not take refuge with the holy Anastasia. Her uncle once took her from thence, and would again, since he is of such surpassing cunning. She shall go to the sacred house of our Lady at Geneva. A fair exchange is no robbery, sweet! I will send the venerable Mother this fair maiden instead of the one I took from thence. Will that content thee? It will be a goodly distance between her and the chief of rebellion. He would have to cross the whole territory of thy stern uncle to reach her. It will be a harder matter to take her out of his hands than he can well achieve.’



## CHAPTER XXII.

### *Count Hagan works mischief.*

MYRRHA was in despair, and felt as if she might easily be goaded into some desperate act. Had she known what had really been decided in these several interviews, she might have ventured to entertain more hopeful views. But she was completely in the dark as to the present state of affairs, nor could interpret any rumour but by her own fears. Left at the palace when Llantildis went down to her pfalzen, she had seen Ethelbert borne past in that dreary procession, and terror lest he should be dead had overwhelmed her for the moment. When she had found, on recovering her senses, that he had been carried to the palace, she hurried back, rejoiced to find he was still alive, but nursed by the Queen and Iërne. All her earnest prayers to be allowed to share the watch by his couch were utterly disregarded, and she saw with bitter jealousy and growing fury the attachment of the Princess Iërne for her valiant champion; nor could she hide from herself his adoring love for the beautiful Armorican. What remained but that he would marry her? Indeed, it was current in Soissons that it was to be a marriage; even the dresses for the bride and the presents of jewels were openly discussed. Not a word of all this did Myrrha breathe to the Princess Llantildis, to whom she never mentioned the name of Ethelbert. She was not quite sure that, if her mistress discovered her attachment for the young warrior, she would not send her from the Court in ignominy, or, perhaps, sell her into some distant land, where she would never see him again.

Full of these bitter thoughts, Myrrha went in and out about her usual duties, careless whether they were fulfilled or not.

Her only thought was how to effect a meeting with Ethelbert; how, perhaps, to make one last effort, even were it one of desperation. Fortune favoured her at last. About a fortnight after his interview with Iërne, Ethelbert, coming down the peristyle from the guard room in the palace, where he was now on duty, was espied by Myrrha as she came out of the sleeping room of the Princess. With her usual ready wit she formed in an instant her plan to attract his attention, and rouse, as she hoped, his sympathy. She let fall the basket she was carrying, and staggering to one of the near columns of the peristyle, she appeared on the point of fainting, just as Ethelbert drew near, in time, as he thought, to save her from a fall.

‘Thou art ill,’ he said to her, kindly. ‘Let me call some one to assist thee.’

‘Oh, no!’ she said, gasping as if for breath; ‘do not call any one!’ I shall be better presently. Take me in there!’ she prayed, pointing to the small room where she generally prepared what was required for the service of the Princess.

Ethelbert supported her into the room with the same care and tenderness he would have shown to any one in such circumstances. To Myrrha, who did not understand his chivalrous nature, so kind, so protecting to all that were suffering, the solicitude he displayed in the short passage to the room to which she had pointed, awoke a desperate hope that she might not yet be wholly indifferent to him. It was so sweet to be waited on by him, to receive water from his hands, to drink, lifting up timid, grateful, swimming eyes to his, that she prolonged as well as she could the delightful moments. But she knew this could not last; some one might pass, and see the contents of her basket scattered about, and seeking for the cause of such a state of things, might enter the room, and so put an end to the interview so long desired, perhaps never to return. She even saw that Ethelbert himself was already anxious to leave her.

‘Thou art better now,’ he said; ‘let me call some one to remain with thee.’

'Oh, shut the door!' she prayed, with supplicating voice. 'I do so want to speak to thee!'

'As thou wilt,' he replied, courteously, 'but what thou hast to say must be short. I am on duty, and may not delay. Tell me what it is! Can I do anything for thee?' he said, as he returned towards her, having closed the door as she desired. She would it had been locked, and the key in her own guard, but that she dared not.

'Oh, yes, much; but I fear thou wilt not,' she answered, looking with eyes full of tears into his. She had now risen, and stood half reclining, as if still faint, on his arm, and leaning her head on his shoulder. Ethelbert changed his position uneasily; there was an ill defined feeling in her actions which he did not like.

'I will if I can,' he answered.

'Ah, that is it!' she exclaimed. 'If thou canst,' and she raised her eyes, full of fire tempered with supplicating tenderness, to his. Ethelbert felt a shock as of some unknown and baleful influence, as his eye met hers. A feeling of repugnance for her succeeded this shock, which he could not help manifesting in the involuntary gesture he made of withdrawing himself from her.

'Ah, cruel!' she said, as she also felt this movement. 'I knew thou wouldst not, and nothing is left for me but to die uncared for and alone!'

'I must go,' he said; 'I cannot stay. Indeed, I am sorry if thou art so unhappy.'

'If—if—ah, who more unhappy! For thou knowest it; thou seest it! I love thee! Thou hast been so kind to me; who has ever shown such kindness to me, a poor slave, buffeted by every one, scorned and rejected by all! Ah, do not go, do not leave me! Let me go with thee! I will follow thee to the end of the world! Let me be thy dog, thy slave! I will never ask a word from thy dear lips, a glance from thy beautiful eyes! Let me only be with thee, see thee. Ah, thou leavest me, and I shall never, never see thee more!' and she threw herself at his feet, clasping his knees in earnest supplication.

'Rise! rise, Myrrha!' he said, this scene becoming intolerably painful to him. 'I am sorry, very, very sorry for thee, but thou knowest this cannot be. I am going away for some time; thou wilt forget me before I return for some one else, more able to return thy love than myself.'

'Some one else!' almost screamed Myrrha. 'Oh! who can ever be so noble, so good, so kind, as thou art to me, a poor slave? It was thy kind, gentle ways, which won my love, my gratitude.'

'I am so sorry,' said Ethelbert, 'that anything I could have said or done could have brought thee to this. Believe me, I ever felt as a brother towards thee, and I can be thy brother and watch over thy interests, and when thou hast met with some one who repays thy devoted love, I will dower thee as if thou wert my own sister.'

'Go, cruel and insensible!' she exclaimed, pushing him from her. 'Sister! cold hearted that thou art! But no, thou art not cold hearted! I know why thou repayest my love with this scorn. I know at whose feet thou hast knelt in lowly supplication unheeded, as I have knelt at thine. But I will be revenged on her, even if I stab her before thy very sight!'

'Hush, Myrrha! now I command thee!' said Ethelbert. 'Thou knowest not what thou art saying. When thou comest to thy senses, thou wilt see how wrong is this. I must go! See, here is some one!' he added, as the door opened.

'Ah!' said Juba, as he protruded his curly head and swarthy face round the door he had cautiously opened. 'I thought I heard voices. I knew not thou hadst such agreeable company, Myrrha. Thou dost not want me here.'

'Stay, Juba, stay with Myrrha!' said Ethelbert, disengaging his doak from her grasp. 'I have remained here too long!' and with a decided movement he forced himself from her, and opening the door wide, in spite of Juba's restraining hand, he went out and disappeared with hasty retreating steps.

'Why didst thou let him pass, Juba? Why didst thou not stab him with thy knife? I could have strangled him, the -cruel, cold, insensible wretch!'

‘Had I known thou wouldst have thanked me for it,’ he answered, ‘I would have done it willingly. Shall I after him?’ continued Juba, grinning at the proposal. ‘But there might be a sweeter revenge on him, Myrrha!’

‘And what is that?’ she asked, as she wrung her hands in her despair and rage at the failure of all her wiles, and the certainty that she had for ever alienated from her the only man she cared for.

‘Kill *her*!’ he answered, with a significance she could not mistake. ‘There are ways and means of accomplishing more difficult matters than this. That would indeed be sweet revenge to feast on his lamentations over her, dead, lost to him for ever.’

‘I wish her uncle would come and take her away, and rid me of her. I hate her. I could kill her myself!’

‘That is the spirit, Myrrha,’ said Juba, ‘to hatch mischief. Who knows but that the opportunity may be even now near at hand? I can tell thee something, if thou canst be discreet.’

‘Not now, Juba; come to me whilst they are at supper. Come now and help gather up all the contents of my basket, which I upset in the peristyle. I wonder no one has asked yet what it all means.’

‘That led me in here. I could not think what had happened. I see now,’ added Juba, laughing; ‘and it was of no use.’

‘Worse than useless,’ answered Myrrha, as she picked up the scattered articles and returned them to the basket in her hand; ‘worse than useless, if it be not the motive of a sweet revenge on him—perhaps on both.’

That same evening, an hour before supper time, Llantildis stood by the royal menagerie lost in amazement to see ‘Tiger’ sitting on his old perch, making all sorts of advances to her, as if he knew her, and were glad to see her again. She had not made up her mind whether to resent his return to a collection so entirely her own, or feel sorry his first master could not return in the same manner, when her brother, the King, came up to her with a well pleased smile on his countenance.

‘Thou didst receive my message then, sweet sister, to meet me here? I thought thou wouldst be pleased to see an old

favourite again. Wilt thou receive his master with the same pleasure? See,' he continued, 'where he comes. I sent for him as soon as I was released from my word to Siegbert. It was a promise I made Sigismer before he left.'

'He might have told me; but he left without a word,' she murmured.

'It was at my wish, dearest sister, and much I know it cost him. Thou must not receive him as if thou wert offended. Make haste and put on thy loveliest smile, for in truth he has loved thee from the first,' he added, pleadingly, as Prince Sigismer, who had arrived but half an hour ago at the palace, advanced up the peristyle towards the place where Chlovis had promised he should meet Llantildis.

'Nay, seal thy contract on her lips, kinsman,' said the King, well pleased to see the radiant smile break over his sister's face, surprised with the delight of seeing him whom she had almost despaired of seeing again. 'And thou must forgive Siegbert, my fairest sister; it is a right good turn he did us all when he gave me such a pretext for breaking off all alliance with him.'

The procession of the warriors, next day, though by no means so numerous as that of the Field of Mars, was very splendid. The two friends, the heroes of the day, rode between Aurelian and Chilperic the Merovingian, who were to present them to the King. The Queen, Iërne, and Llantildis, with the principal Gaulish ladies, had taken the same route as they did for the Field of Mars. As it was a ceremony of honour, and not a mere military gathering, the Queen occupied a seat on the left of the King, on a throne like his, both under the usual canopy, on a dais covered with splendid carpets. The Princesses sat on lower seats, on each side of the throne, whilst the other ladies not immediately in attendance on the Queen were placed in the gallery.

As soon as the King had taken his seat there was a flourish of trumpets. When it had ceased, the King asked in a loud clear voice why he had been summoned to be present at such a gathering. Aurelian, leading Ethelbert to the foot of the dais, claimed for him the chain of valour as reward of service rendered

at peril of his life. Being further asked by the King what service he had rendered, Aurelian detailed the young man's share in the rescue of the Armorican Princess from the hands of Siegbert. On this, Chlovis rose, and declaring him worthy of the honour, took from a small silk cushion held by the Antrustion Chararic a massive gold chain or necklet, the ambition of every warrior. Aurelian, leading Ethelbert up the steps of the dais, caused him to kneel before the King, and removing his helmet exposed his still pale but earnest countenance, lit up with enthusiasm derived from the inward joy it was to find himself thus publicly recognized as the accepted knight of his beloved lady.

The King passed the chain round his neck, whilst his comrades clashed their arms and shouted—'Ja wohl! ja wohl!' with a fervour equalled by the multitude, producing a burst of cheering which might have been heard for miles. Then Aurelian led him to the Queen, who, taking a coronet of laurel leaves interspersed with gold berries, placed it on his head, congratulating him on the honour he had obtained from the King. Rising from his knees, Ethelbert then went to the spot where sat the mistress of his heart and sword. Kneeling before her, he laid at the foot of his sovereign lady the gold chain and laurel wreath he had just received. Accepting the wreath as her due, she bade him resume his chain, and taking from a page standing near her the shield of Ethelbert, its dints effaced, its brightness restored, the white ermine gleaming in spotless purity on the blue field in the centre of the gold cross, she gave it to him, beseeching him to bear it into the thickest of the fight, till he met the oppressor of her country face to face and delivered Armorica from his fury and tyranny. Ethelbert then rose and returned to his place in the ranks of his comrades, whilst Athanaric, led by Chilperic, went through the same ceremonies, only that he laid neither his laurel wreath nor chain at the foot of the Princess Llantildis, from whom, however, he received a shield inlaid with gold, his encounter with King Siegbert in all its details deeply engraved on its surface.

A grand festival was then held in the dining hall, where the same order was followed as before. Prince Sigismer sat close

beside Llantildis, their betrothal being thus publicly acknowledged. When the feasting was over, Aurelian took the skald's seat, and, to the great delight of all the assembled company, sang the rescue of the White Ermine from the power of the wolf, who would have devoured her but for the valour of the sharp-sighted hawk, who had delivered her from his fangs.

Further ceremonials and festivals were in prospect. The espousals of the Princess to the Eastern Prince were to take place before long, and Remigius was shortly to be in Soissons to perform the sacred rite. The baptism of the Princess Ierne was to take place after the departure of the bride to the East, and time had been given to Soissons to recover from its gaieties and assume a more sober aspect, suited for the solemn rite which the Queen and the Archbishop wished to invest with a significance most striking to the King and all his warlike followers. A free pass had already been obtained from Gundovald for her passage through his dominions to the Convent of our Lady at Geneva. Aurelian and Ethelbert were to escort her with a body of picked men, the Countess Friedmunda also returning to Burgundy under their protection.

'Four days more,' said Llantildis to herself, 'and I shall be the wife of Sigismer; and then for my triumph at Constantinople. What expectation there will be to see me, the report of whose beauty drew so far north the handsome Prince to woo me for his bride! All those dark and black haired women will die of envy to see my fair skin, my dazzling bright gold locks, my rich dresses, my costly ornaments. That is a lovely coronet the Queen has given me, and worthy the sister of so great a ruler as Chlovis. There will be no one there to dispute the palm of beauty with me with the fickle courtiers and people, and when I drive through the streets in my golden car, drawn by white mules with purple housings—I will have purple, despite the old Emperor!—how they will shout and praise my beauty. Leona!' she suddenly said, as the Roman matron entered the room where she was lying on her couch,



'what is all that shutting of doors—such a noise—that running to and fro that I hear?'

'They are the King's officers, noble mistress,' she answered, 'hurrying forth to proclaim the ban<sup>1</sup> and summon the heer ban of the army. A messenger has arrived from King Gundovald of Burgundy,' she continued, as Llantildis remained speechless with horror and dismay, 'to demand the aid of his good friend and valiant ally the King of France, entreating him to come to his relief with all speed.'

'Oh, what dreadful thing has happened, Leona? Tell me, tell me quickly,' she said, as soon as she could command her voice. 'It must be something dreadful.'

'He has been attacked in Lyons suddenly by his brother Gondemar and the Count Hagan. He escaped with bare life, and is now at Vienne, cut off from his supplies, hemmed in by enemies thirsting for his blood. I was with the Queen when His Highness told her.'

'Now indeed'—so had run the message of the beleaguered King—'is the hour to show thy loyalty and truth. Come to my aid with all the speed thou mayest; unless, indeed, this rebellion is at thy instigation, and to further thy ambitious purposes.'

'Oh, fly my lord,' implored the young Queen, her arm around his neck. 'Fly without delay to his rescue. Your truth, your honour, is dearer than life. Let him not have one moment in which to call in question your loyalty, and tax your generous nature with treachery and falsehood.'

'My dearest life, I will go this instant. I was only thinking of my sister's marriage, of the Princess Iërne, of thyself, my ever fairest. I am indeed in great perplexity.'

'Think of nothing, my dear lord, but your honour at stake,' implored Chlotildis. 'It is true we owe not much to this man. Still you are his ally, bound by treaty to aid and succour him in every extremity. Your sister loves your honour better than herself; I can answer for that. As for the Princess Iërne, God will care for her, for myself also. If my unworthy

<sup>1</sup> Compulsory summons (Menzel, *History of Germany*).

life is still needed for the furtherance of His glory on earth, you need not fear any harm will overtake me.'

Chlovis caught the lovely young Queen to his breast, covering her sweet trusting face upturned to his with passionate kisses; then clasping his helmet on his head, and taking up his francisque, he hurried from the room.

It appeared from the report of the messenger, that no sooner had Count Hagan returned to Burgundy after the birth of the young Prince, than he determined to make good the claims of the infant to the throne of his grandfather. He lost no time in assembling and organizing a party as determined as himself, to wrest the power from him they called murderer and usurper, and establish the young King in his rightful inheritance. When the news of the death of the child reached him, he had gone too far to retreat in safety. For the sake of mere self-preservation, he was obliged to declare himself, and fly into open revolt. Nerved with the energy of despair, he made those incredible efforts which all but placed Gundovald in the hands of his bitterest enemy, and from whom he could have expected no less a fate than that he had meted out to his unfortunate brother.

It was well in this emergency that Chilperic the Merovingian and Ragnacair of Cambray were both at Soissons, to be present at the marriage festivities. A feast, or a fight, it was no matter to them; both were equally welcome. Chlovis despatched Ragnacair to Cambray to establish a sufficient guard to keep the Morini at bay, and to return with what forces he could muster, and follow into Burgundy. He was also to see Siegbert, and to admonish him to guard the frontier on his side against the Alemanni.

'And tell him,' said the King, already on horseback at the head of his immediate guards, ready to depart, 'as he values my pardon for his breach of trust, and my farther favour, to acquit himself like a man who has some regard for his good name.'

Sigismer would have gone with the King, but Chlovis would not accept his services in any other place than Soissons.

‘It is thy guard, Sigismer,’ he had said to him, ‘and by all our ties of blood, I entreat thee to remain. My trusted Chararic will be glad of thy wise counsels and valiant arm to share the responsibility of such a charge. To say nothing of the city, there is my sweet spouse, thine own bride, and my lovely captive. Would she were safe in the refuge of the convent at Geneva!’

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### *Prince Theodoric.*

MYRRHA seemed to think that the one who suffered most from this sudden change of the pleasant life of the palace to one so dull and monotonous, was herself. The caprices of her mistress were intolerable to her, superadded as they were to her own private griefs. The life of retirement which the Queen now led, spending the best part of the day in prayer and acts of charity, visiting the sick, consoling the afflicted, as most befitting her almost widowed state, made it imperative on Llantildis to follow her example, at least in keeping to the privacy of her own apartments, except at the time allotted for the dinner and supper hour. It was much against her will that she was obliged to rise and follow the Queen, when she shortened these minutes, and withdrew from a scene where she felt her heart was not present. An attempt on the part of Llantildis to remain, one evening, had been so coldly met by Sigismer that she did not dare to renew it. His behaviour also aggravated her extremely. He seemed over anxious, full of weighty thought, he was reserved in his manner to her, and his respectful tenderness to the young Queen in her sorrowful condition offended her, whilst his chivalrous bearing to Iërne, whose story he knew, and whom he considered as his especial charge, enraged her at times almost beyond control. She visited her wrath on Myrrha, till the Greek slave became exasperated in her turn, and inly vowed a deep revenge on the hateful barbarian, who all but trampled her beneath her feet.

At first it was almost more than Myrrha could bear; and it would have surprised no one, witness to these scenes, had some

sudden but fatal act of revenge on the part of the Greek been the termination of one of them. By degrees, however, Myrrha seemed to care less for these violent outbursts. She became less irritable in herself, and more callous to the ill temper of her mistress. She escaped from her irksome presence as soon as ever she could, and throwing her veil over her head with a touch of her former alacrity, she left the palace every evening during the supper hour, seemingly intent on some private expedition.

It was by accident that one evening she had met a tall and rather handsome man, a total stranger to her. To her surprise he accosted her and begged her to stop and listen to him, for he had been watching for her for some days. The result of this first interview was that Myrrha was fully persuaded that she had secured a new admirer. This so flattered her vanity that she consented to meet him again for two or three evenings, even finding some consolation in his tender speeches for the rebuffs she had met with from the young Frank. Her vexation was the more acute when, before a week was half over, she discovered by his questions, and his pressing entreaty to be allowed to see her in the palace, that it was not she who was the object of his anxious thoughts, but no less a person than the Armorican Princess.

‘I might have known it,’ she said, choking with anger. ‘What else could I expect? Admit you into the palace? You must be mad to think any one can enter there with impunity. The vigilance of the Antrusion is not so easily deceived, and I am not at all sure that he does not know all about you and your daring designs already. I have a great mind to go and tell him myself. And why not?’ she asked, scornfully, tossing her head as he dared her to do it.

‘Because of this,’ he said, half drawing a long keen knife from a sheath attached to his belt. ‘One step with such an intention in thy breast, and this shall be there also. And know that it will find thee out wherever thou thinkest thyself most secure, should we fail in this enterprise by thy treachery or not.’

‘Why wert thou such a fool as to threaten the man with a thing the farthest from thy thought?’ said Juba to her that same evening, when she had returned half dead with terror to the palace, and had sought him, beside herself with fear. ‘But calm thyself, I will see these men and make thy peace. I should have thought thy heart would have leapt to seize such an opportunity to revenge thyself on one at least of thine enemies. We must manage to finish this business quickly, or we shall have the King coming back; we should all be in for it then; and when we had paid the penalty for such a promising affair, thy handsome Frank lover will marry his beautiful Princess, laughing at thy impotence to thwart him and thy impudence in attempting it—slave as thou art!’

‘Oh, I will; I will do it, if I die for it,’ cried the unfortunate Myrrha, stung to the quick by Juba’s speech. For she believed with all Soissons that as soon as he returned from his present expedition, Ethelbert was to marry the Armorican Princess and depart with her to the Court of Burgundy, where a post of honour awaited the happy bridegroom. Rumour having, as usual, amused herself in blending truth with falsehood, in a manner that would be ridiculous were it not so fatal.

There was more than one man to meet Juba at the place where Myrrha had told him she had promised to go. Long and anxiously did they consult together. It was a scheme after Juba’s own heart, but he felt it was impossible to make even a beginning without Myrrha. Her cooperation was most essential, as she alone had access to the Princess Llantildis, and he promised to bring her again to meet the men, and between bribes and threats he thought they could manage her. A fresh addition to their number that day had brought a small casket of costly jewels. This the African thought might be used as a lure to tempt the Princess out to see them. If she could only be induced to bring the Armorican with her!

‘And see!’ said Myrrha’s pretended admirer to her, as she stood once more beside him, such report had Juba made of the beautiful ornaments, ‘what a lovely coral necklace this is, fastened with gold clasps. It shall be thine if thou wilt but

aid us in this affair. See how well it looks on thy dark skin.'

'For me!' she exclaimed in rapture. 'Oh how lovely! But that is too beautiful for me.'

'Can anything be too beautiful for thee?' said her tempter, with an insinuating smile. 'And if thou couldst but introduce this casket to the notice of the Frank Princess, there would be rarer presents for thee. See what sparkling jewels; these are ornaments befitting a bride so illustrious as she is.' Myrrha opened her eyes wide at sight of the dazzling contents of the casket he now opened before her; but she shook her head. The jewels *might* tempt her; but everything was so changed since the King's departure, every outlet to the palace so strictly guarded.

'Here are earrings,' he continued, 'to match the necklace, and this lovely bracelet. Do thou but get thy mistress to consent to see this casket, and thou shalt have both. And when we have sold even one of these ornaments to her, thou shalt have thy choice amongst the rest. If it is too difficult an enterprise to enter the palace, could she not be induced to come out, and bring a friend with her?'

'A friend,' thought Myrrha. 'Yes, it might be done—but how to manage it? It would be a pity to lose those lovely ornaments for want of trying what could be done. It would be as well to let her mistress see the necklace and excite her curiosity—something might come of it.'

Acting upon this resolve, Myrrha purposely dropped the box containing it, as she went to and fro in her preparations next evening for the toilet of the Princess.

'What is that?' she exclaimed, impatiently. 'Canst thou not make less noise?'

'It is such a lovely thing,' she answered. 'I have been asked to show it to you. How beautiful it would look on the smooth alabaster of your neck. And why should you not wear it? Were I you, gracious Princess, I would put it on, and go into supper with it, and not lie here, whilst others are usurping your place and receiving the admiration due to your rank and beauty.'

‘Though Llantildis was galled by such a speech, and inwardly resented that Myrrha should notice any neglect shown to her, real or fancied, she roused herself from the couch on which she had thrown herself in a fit of temper, declaring she would not go in to supper, and looked at the necklace which Myrrha now displayed. Her eyes flashed with pleasure; it was not a common ornament. She had seen such at the Court of Ravenna, they were not easily to be had so far from the Mediterranean as Soissons.

‘I do not mind buying it,’ she said, negligently, ‘and should not mind looking at the other ornaments thou tellest me of; but thou knowest the stern Chararic is not likely to permit any strangers within the palace; as for Prince Sigismer, I would not ask his leave forsooth.’

With a contemptuous gesture she allowed her slave to clasp it round her neck. During this occupation, Myrrha, seeing she liked it, said, ‘I would not be beholden to any one for permission to see what I chose. Why should you not go out and see them, if you cannot see them within the palace? You are not a prisoner yet, though you may be before long, if you do not exert your own free will. You might go out when the Prince and the Antrusion are on duty. We must try and give your escort the slip, and I could arrange with the men where they were to meet you.’

Llantildis brightened up at the prospect of such an escapade. It promised some little excitement, and besides, the pleasure of outwitting both Sigismer and the Antrusion. Surveying herself in the hand glass, with a satisfaction she had not felt for some time, she paid Myrrha handsomely for the necklace, with which she hoped to dazzle the eyes of all beholders at supper.

‘I thought thou hadst worn it already,’ said Sigismer, very simply, when, towards the end of the supper, she had asked him, provoked at his not noticing it, how he liked it.

‘I suppose there is more attraction for thee in a black ribband round a woman’s neck,’ she answered, and her eyes lightened with scorn as they rested on the unconscious Iërne, speaking, at that moment, to the Queen.



Sigismer looked at her aghast. He could not comprehend her sudden passion, nor the motive which prompted her to rise from the table, and sweep out of the triclinium before any one guessed her intention.

‘Thou mayest tell thy friend I will see his casket, let who will say me nay,’ she said, as she entered her room, to Myrrha, who, warned of her approach, had fled in all haste to meet her. She saw something was amiss, but she dared not ask her what it was.

Juba soon found out what had taken place. He was delighted; it was, he said, a most prosperous beginning. Did not Myrrha now see, he asked her, how cleverly it could be all managed, without risk or blame attaching to any one but Llantildis herself? She had only to work upon her jealousy of the Armorican, as Juba irreverently called Iërne, till she was roused to a pitch of madness, in which she would forget all considerations, and think only of vengeance. He pressed Myrrha to tell her mistress of a meeting between the Prince and Iërne which he had witnessed a day or two before; so opportune, that one could almost have sworn it was planned. She had dropped a book, as if she were startled, and he had picked it up, and ere he returned it to her, he had pressed the cover with his lips.

Myrrha told him it would have been more to the purpose if it had been her hand, on which Juba grinned, and proposed she should swear to the hand, since there had been no one there to prove the contrary. But Myrrha would not promise him. She was still sore on the point of her wounded vanity, and, notwithstanding the fear of the knife which had glittered before her eyes, she held back in spite of herself, as if the very nearness of the occasion she had desired with so much passion had filled her heart with dread; and, but for another outburst on the part of her mistress, she would almost have given it all up, and risked the consequences.

So great was the rage of Llantildis when Myrrha told her of what she was pleased to call the treachery of Prince Sigismer, that the Greek ventured to propose to her, not

without some trepidation, that she should rid herself for ever of one so presumptuous as to dispute with her the affection of her betrothed.

‘I wish I could!’ replied the Princess, her face dark with passion.

‘I know how it might be done,’ said Myrrha, slowly, her heart beating almost to suffocation, as she felt her way over ground she knew to be most dangerous.

‘And Chlovis—the King!’ gasped Llantildis, as Myrrha now went rapidly on, in answer to the imperious command of her mistress, to say what she meant; emboldened as she was by the silence of Llantildis, caused by her consternation, as she listened to a plan so daring, involving in its execution so much peril to all concerned.

‘And serve him right too, for leaving her here,’ she answered; her own courage rising as she saw Llantildis falter. ‘Why did he not serve her as he does other captives, and make her wear a collar, like Juba? Making her companion, almost equal to the Queen, instead of leaving her in her proper place, where she would have had no opportunity of pitting herself against you, and weaning the affection of Prince Sigismer from you!’

‘I cannot believe it, Myrrha. Sigismer—— Oh, it is impossible! If I thought it were so,’ and she stopped, but her eyes kindled, and she clenched her hand as if it held a knife, and her face assumed a set and cruel determination.

‘And if I would prove it to you, bring it before your own eyes,’ asked Myrrha, ‘would you hesitate then?’

‘Not a moment,’ answered Llantildis. ‘But thou canst not prove it, Myrrha. Thou dardest not show me what a fool I am!’

‘Do you but wait, illustrious, I will prove it to you. I cannot bear to see you, so trusting, deceived in so barefaced and open a manner.’

Whilst Llantildis tossed sleepless on her pillow, Myrrha, closeted with Juba, took counsel with him how to bring about a scene which should impel Llantildis to overcome all scruples,

even the dread of the King's wrath. All next day did they watch their opportunity, and began to despair of accomplishing it, till towards evening, an hour before supper time, Juba gave Myrrha the sign that Prince Sigismer had returned to the palace. A few moments after that warning a slave stood at the door of the Queen's apartments, and prayed that the Princess Iërne would proceed at once to the aviary, where the Princess Llantildis would fain have speech of her.

On reaching the royal menagerie, Iërne was surprised not only not to find the Frank Princess there, but to see Prince Sigismer approach. He had received a message in the guard room, telling him that the Princess Llantildis awaited him in the menagerie, where 'Tiger' was very ill. Though both were much surprised to meet such a different person from the one they expected, neither had any reason to doubt the good faith of both messages, till the Prince, going into the aviary, took 'Tiger' off his perch, who forthwith flapped his wings lustily, and otherwise expressed his pleasure at seeing the master who had so often carressed and fed him.

'There must be some mistake,' he said. 'I fear you have been disturbed without a cause. I pray you think me not to blame in this matter. I had no idea but that Llantildis awaited me here. You are not annoyed with me, I hope,' he pleaded to Iërne.

She assured him, in what little Latin she could command, that she held him blameless, and was convinced it was a mistake. Sigismer, still further troubled with the sweet patience with which she strove to explain herself, bent down, and taking her hand in respectful deprecation, touched it reverently with his lips.

Turning to reconduct her, he encountered Llantildis, blazing with jealous fury. 'Traitor!' she almost shrieked; 'my brother the King shall hear of this! He shall say if this be worthy treatment of a Sicambrian Princess!' And before Sigismer knew what she was about, she snatched up poor 'Tiger' where he sat perched on his master's wrist, and wrenching his neck, flung the poor bird in his face.

Sigismer seized her by the arm, and looked at her with the same savage glare that shone in his eyes on the day of the wolf hunt. Then it was merely in jest that he had assumed that look, but now it was in the earnestness of his wrath. Flinging his betrothed from him, he took the frightened Iërne by the hand, and led her to the Queen's apartments.

This was more than Myrrha wanted. She had hoped to rouse the jealous rage of Llantildis, and make her consent in her fury to any plan, however desperate, which would rid her of her hated rival. It would now be impossible, she thought, to mend such a rupture so as to induce the Armorican Princess to accompany one who had so openly insulted her. It was a terrible catastrophe; the whole affair, she felt convinced, was irretrievably ruined, and she trembled, not for the loss of her promised reward, but for intense fear of the Armorican knife, which its owner had told her should find her, if she failed, wherever she was.

Juba, however, saw farther than she did. He told her that the Queen would do all she could to mend the breach between the betrothed, and the very grossness of the insult would most likely prove the motive for some extraordinary overture of reconciliation from the Frank to the Armorican.

It was easier for the gentle and pious Queen to win over the generous Sigismer than the haughty barbarian. The latter would scarcely yield even when Sigismer frankly owned to her that he had made a mistake in thinking that the absence of the King and his charge of the palace demanded of him more deference in his manner towards her who was his affianced bride than a more familiar conduct. Prompted by Myrrha, she consented at last to accept his explanations, but it was not with a good grace, and her manner to him remained cold and reserved. Her vanity was cruelly wounded by the consciousness of her having laid herself open to the censure of every one in the palace; for all took the part of the gentle Iërne in the matter. There was also the grudge she owed Iërne for being the cause, however innocent, of her folly; and there was the deeper feeling of conscious treachery in her heart, determined as she

was, in her infatuation, to revenge herself to the utmost on the hapless maiden. For Myrrha was now her counsellor, and a more evil one she could not well have.

‘Thou knowest that I have made up my mind that it shall be done,’ she said to her slave; ‘so do now what seems best to thee in this affair.’

That evening Myrrha told the Armoricans of her success with her mistress, leaving to Juba the details of all the plans. She returned from her private expedition, not only with her own promised reward, but also with the ornaments, which had been provided at Juba’s suggestion, to tempt Llantildis out of the palace to inspect them. She also contrived to make Llantildis believe she had purchased them for her, and put the money her mistress gave her for them with that which she had already received from her.

Llantildis was more herself that evening at supper. True, she had to exert all her will to keep up appearances, agitated as she was by the consciousness of her meditated treachery towards the confiding maiden who answered her advances with so sweet a grace that any other but the inexorable Llantildis would have been disarmed. Even for her the charm was almost too great. But she was cruel, even to the death, as she had shown herself in the case of the unfortunate Fritigildis. So, nerving herself to meet the occasion, she braved it out with a proud determination.

‘Oh, yes!’ cried the young Prince Theodoric, with animation, as he sat by the Queen’s side. ‘Do go to thy pfalzen to-morrow, sweet aunt, and we will be thy escort. It will be just about the time when we shall be coming home from our afternoon exercise.’

‘We must have a more efficient escort for the Princess than your young troop can prove as yet, my fair son,’ interposed the Queen, as she stroked his long silken hair. ‘But thou canst go also,’ she added, seeing his look of disappointment.

‘I will go myself,’ said Prince Sigismer; ‘it is a good step beyond the gates of the city to thy pfalzen, Llantildis.’

‘We need not go so far,’ she answered, passing her handkerchief across her mouth, as if to keep down the choking in her throat; ‘only a drive in the cool of the evening, after thy return from setting the guard.’

‘It would be a pleasant drive,’ said the Queen, anxious to forward such amicable overtures of returning peace. ‘There can be no objection, noble Chararic?’

‘None whatever,’ he replied. ‘The presence of his Highness and a couple or so of the guards would be ample escort, even against a threatened danger. I will set the guards to-morrow evening, under thy pleasure, valiant Prince. So her Highness can go as early as she chooses.’

Next day, an hour before the time fixed for the excursion, the Antrusion, in the guard room, with Prince Sigismer, received a mysterious looking missive. ‘Thou hadst better read it,’ he said, handing it to the Prince; ‘it is sacred runes to me.’

The Prince took the rather soiled piece of parchment, and read the message, which, strange to say, was written in Latin. ‘Allow not the Princess,’ so it ran, ‘to take the air this evening. It is known at what hour her chariot is ordered; she will be expected whatever road she takes, for she will be watched. Follow the bearer with all speed. He will bring you to the place where treachery lies in wait. You must come prepared to resist a well-armed force. There is no time for counsel; prompt action will alone enable you to surprise a nest of hornets, and frustrate their schemes.’

The two warriors looked at each other. Each read in the face of his comrade the conviction of his own mind. The hour which they had long known was more than possible was even now upon them. Chararic turned in stern question of the messenger, but all efforts to draw information from him were useless. He knew nothing save that he was to lead them to a place two miles on the Paris road. By his description Chararic knew it must be near the ruined building where Ethelbert surprised the schemes of Siegbert. After a short but earnest conference, the chariot of Llantildis was counter-

manded. Juba, lounging in the peristyle near the guard room, was despatched on this mission.

‘Even if it came round,’ said the Prince, ‘I am confident she would not start in my absence. However, it is best I should warn the Queen of this thing. She would delay the Princess till my return.’

But the Queen was not in the palace; she was out with the priest Lupus on her daily ministrations of charity. Both the Princesses were with her; at least, such was the assertion he received from the Greek slave, volunteered on her part as she met him in the peristyle. Leaving an urgent message to be delivered to the Queen the moment of her return, he rejoined the Antrusion, awaiting him in the courtyard, with as many of the guards as could be well spared from the palace. Increasing their numbers at the first outpost they passed, they set off at a fast trot along the Paris road, their minds filled with a conflict of doubt, mistrust, and forebodings of mischief, all the more alarming that it was so wholly undefined.

Not long after they had left the court of the palace, the chariot of Llantildis drew up at the inner gate. When she arrived, accompanied by the Armorican Princess, she was told by the attendant instructed by Juba, that Prince Sigismer had left word that if she would proceed to the north gate, the escort would join her. As she entered the chariot without demur, Iërne took her place beside her, the Frank Princess driving. When they reached the north gate, and found the escort was not there, Llantildis detached two of her attendants down the street in opposite directions to obtain some news of it.

‘We can go out a few steps, and see if they are coming,’ she said to her remaining attendant. Even as she spoke, Llantildis, who had preconcerted everything under the direction of Myrrha, drove beyond the gate, her heart beating violently as she drew near the moment of her meditated revenge on the unsuspecting maiden by her side, who sat silently thinking what a lovely evening for a drive, and how kind it was of the Princess to take her out.

Llantildis drove slowly, slowly, down the road, not a movement of compunction in her relentless breast for the unfortunate girl she was leading to destruction. Secure, as she believed herself from all implication in the conspiracy, safe to escape with only a remonstrance, sharp as it might be, for her imprudence, she held her on her way till she began to descend a long steep hill. The chariot had scarcely proceeded many steps, when a number of mounted and armed men sprang out from the side of the road. With a blow of his mace the foremost felled the attendant who had hurried to the head of his startled mules. His next action was to lift the unfortunate Iërne from the chariot, and, placing her before him, gallop off with her at a pace which defied pursuit. An obstacle he had not anticipated met him in the troop of young horsemen returning from their afternoon exercise up the road in a state of wild excitement, racing to reach the palace in time to escort the Princess and her friend. The flying horseman dashed through them before they could make out what he was, but meeting the Comes, who was in the rear, and had seen him coming down the hill, and who now made a snatch at his bridle, he swept his mace round and struck him such a blow on the head as made him drop from his horse to the ground. Unchecked, he then pursued his onward way, nor looked behind to see if any of his companions were following.

These did not find it such an easy task to rejoin their leader. The Princess Llantildis seeing herself also an object of attack, a thing she had not for a moment supposed probable, and furious with what she thought Myrrha's treachery, snatched the sharp knife from the belt of the man who stooped to lift her out of the chariot, and stabbed him to the heart. His fall embarrassed his companions who flew to his help, and the determined Frank held them at bay with her long keen knife and fierce eye. It was not for long; one of them coming behind her, struck the knife out of her hand, and she was torn out of the chariot in an instant, and would have shared the fate of the unfortunate maiden she had betrayed, but for the timely rescue of the young Prince Theodoric, who came up at that



moment. He, seeing what was going on round the chariot, had urged Haco up the hill with frantic shouts. He arrived just as the man had contrived to bind securely in her cloak the struggling Llantildis, who bit and scratched like a wild cat, till so entangled in its folds she could no longer move. At this man Prince Theodoric rushed with wild cries, ran his spear right through his shoulder, and drawing his small sword attacked him furiously, stabbing him in the ribs. Already much exhausted with his struggle to secure Llantildis, staggered with this new blow, and faint from the loss of blood which poured profusely from his wound in the shoulder, the man reeled in his saddle and fell, bearing Llantildis to the ground, but not before he had stabbed the arm of the brave child with his sharp knife, the only weapon he could use, hampered as he was with the Princess. A general *mêlée* ensued in the struggle to recover and carry off the captive, and it might have gone hard with the valiant and true 'wolf cubs,' as they were called, but for the more effectual succour of Prince Sigismer and the Antrusion galloping up to the scene, their hearts full of the direst wrath at having been deceived.

Led by the messenger beyond the spot which Chararic knew from his description, their suspicions were aroused. To the imperative shout of the Antrusion to stop, the man only answered by starting off full gallop along the road, followed, as he meant to be, by half the escort.

'Back to the city,' shouted Sigismer to the Antrusion; 'back men, back; there is treachery at work.'

Neck and neck galloped the furious Franks back to Soissons. There they soon heard that the chariot of the Princess had passed out by the northern gates. In a whirl of conjecture as to what it could all mean, they held on their course till they came to the spot where the gallant children were fighting furiously over the prostrate Llantildis.

It was only a question of a few moments, after such a reinforcement. The men who had attacked the chariot, finding their efforts to secure the Frank Princess were frustrated, broke through the crowd of their enemies and fled, pursued by the

determined children and Chararic. Sigismer dismounting, raised Llantildis from the ground, bruised by her fall, and half suffocated with the folds of the cloak, wrapped round her like the case of a mummy. All his love reawakened by the sense of the danger she had run; he loosened her cloak, and finding she was not dead, he placed her with the greatest tenderness in the chariot. Some of the guard from the city hearing what was going on at the north gate, rode up in haste; and finding the struggle over, they lifted Prince Theodoric from the ground, and placed him in the chariot beside Llantildis.

‘O mother, sweet mother!’ murmured the child, ‘they have not carried thee off, but they have killed thee, and I could not save thee.’

‘Take him before you and carry him to the palace,’ said Prince Sigismer, as Llantildis with a piercing shriek fell back in the chariot in a dead faint.

Tired out and nearly exhausted, the weary children and their bedraggled horses returned late in the night to the city, led by Chararic, whose praise and encouragements had been exerted to the utmost to keep up their flagging spirits, whilst the Comes, still dizzy from the effects of the blow he had received, joined them before they reached the palace.

The pursuit of the fugitives had been taken up all along the road by the various guards whose stations they had passed in their flight, and was carried on in a manner so determined that of all the men who had attacked the chariot of the Princess Llantildis, Gwench’lan, carrying before him the unfortunate Iërne, more dead than alive, and the young King Budik alone repassed the Armorican frontier.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### *The Altar of Sacrifice.*

IT was a night of terror in the palace. To add to the general consternation, Myrrha was found dead in the small room devoted to her use, stabbed to the heart, not with the long keen knife she had so much dreaded, but with a knife known to have belonged to Juba. Juba was gone, no one knew whither; but as every box and drawer in Myrrha's room was broken open and rifled, it was supposed he had killed her in order to rob her, and had profited by the dismay and confusion in the palace to get clear away with his booty. Sigismer listened to these dreadful details, his face white with horror, rage and vexation in his heart, whilst the Antrusion, pretty much in the same state, had up every domestic, captive and slave, in the palace, threatening instant death to all if they did not divulge everything they knew of the whole affair. He gathered scant information from this scrutiny, except that it appeared as if every one had been directed by Juba in all that was done, and Sigismer and the Antrusion remembered with a rage they could scarcely control, that it was with him that they had left the urgent message for the Queen not to allow the Princess to go out, and which, of course, she never received. It was elicited during the cross questioning that Juba had returned to the palace late at night for some time past, and this, coupled with the evidence of one who had seen him in the company of some strange looking men, laid bare the part he had no doubt played in the affair. Who were his accomplices in the palace, or whether he had any, did not appear. The death of Myrrha might show she was implicated. She might have been largely bribed, and Juba, knowing that she had received

money, had murdered her in order to obtain it. As she was gone, it was hopeless expecting to know much more.

The Queen, her beautiful eyes drowned in tears for the fate of the lost Iërne, hung over the bed of the young Prince, bathing his wounds, pouring restoratives down his throat, wiping his pale lips and kissing them with tender affection, lavishing on him a mother's care and a mother's love.

'My brave boy,' she murmured; 'thou at least hast done thy duty.'

Her anxious care was at length repaid. Theodoric opened his eyes, and smiled the moment he recognized her. 'Dearest mother,' he said, faintly, 'my father's sister—is she dead?'

'No, love, no. Do not speak, my darling, thou art weak and faint. Nurtia, go and ask Leona for the confection we made at the time the noble Ethelbert lay wounded. The one, I mean, the Princess Iërne——' And here the Queen's courage gave way, and she fairly sobbed. The name of the lost maiden she had loved so dearly seemed to recall the terrible truth in all its dread reality.

Nurtia returned aghast. 'O lady! O Queen! O my royal mistress! Go, go to Leona! The Princess is bereft of her senses. She says such awful things. Oh, the vile barbarian! She killed the mother, and now she has killed the son, my beautiful boy—the brave young Prince!'

'Nurtia, peace! for the sake of our Blessed Lady, peace, peace! He will hear thee. Oh! he has fainted again.'

'May it please your Highness,' said one of the ladies attendant on Llantildis, 'to come to Leona. The Princess is wild with delirium, and says the most awful things.'

'Nurtia,' said the Queen, rising in haste, 'God forbid it should be as thou sayest! Oh, holy Father,' she said, as the priest Lupus entered the room, 'thanks be to God thou art come! Thou wilt stay with the Prince till I return. Llantildis is very ill. Nurtia knows what to do. Nurtia,' she continued, as she took her apart, 'for the love of Christ, peace! Close thy lips on the thoughts of thy heart. For the peace of my dear lord be silent, even if thy fearful surmises be true. I

adjure thee as my sister in the one true Catholic faith. Ah! that is well. Be thou ever blessed for that assenting word.'

'Leona, this is frightful!' she said, as she stood beside the couch where the cruel Llantildis, in the delirium of terror and frenzy uttered such words as told, if not all, yet so much of the share which she had borne in the catastrophe of the evening as to allow the rest to be guessed by the shuddering Queen. Broken sentences, addressed now to Myrrha, whom she evidently thought present, now in threatened vengeance on Iërne, were mixed with terrifying shrieks. 'I have murdered the son as I did the mother!' she cried. 'Fritigel, Fritigel! Oh, she comes! save me, save me! Her breast is bleeding! take her away! It was the sword of Chlovis, but it was I who sent it home! And she too stood in my way; and I betrayed her. Come back, Iërne! Iërne! Iërne!' And then louder and wilder shrieks followed in rapid succession. 'The stain of innocent blood is on my soul,' she resumed. 'Blood, blood!' she would murmur after the fit was passed. 'Chlovis! he will kill me! kill the traitor! He loved Fritigel; I killed her. He loved Iërne; I betrayed her. Seize Myrrha! seize the wretch—the demon who tempted me! Melt the jewels, and pour them down her throat! Let her die—die!'

'Lock the door, Leona!' said Chlotildis, her face pale with terror. 'We must subdue this wild delirium by every means in our power. For the love of Christ, let no one hear her. Oh, my dear lord! what anguish such treachery would be to his noble heart. We must keep it from him if we can, Leona. It is no use what thou sayest; we will tell them it was the madness of fever, of terror. I cannot let him hear of it. He would never know any peace again.'

All night the two watched in that awful room, tending the unfortunate maniac with the greatest care and skill. Towards morning she was less wild, her cries no longer rang so loudly, and the tapestry hanging before the door deadened the sound so much that they were no longer heard beyond the walls of her room. From time to time a message had come to the Queen from Lupus to say the Prince Theodoric had revived

and was now quite conscious, and if her presence was still required near the Princess, she could remain there without any anxiety on the boy's account.

Towards midday the Archbishop arrived. He had set out for Soissons the moment the fatal news had reached him. His presence was the greatest comfort to the Queen, worn out with grief, anxiety, and watching.

'It is in vain to hope, my daughter,' he said to her, as, on her knees before him, she pleaded for the peace of her 'dear, dear lord,' that the awful revelations of his sister should be kept from him. 'It is in vain to try and direct events prepared for us by the wisdom of the Omniscient. It shall not be from me thy lord shall hear of it, and thou hast my best wishes it may not reach his ear. But if it is so ordered, thinkest thou to keep it from him? And how knowest thou it is not for the best he should hear it? Has it not seemed to thee rather that this may be for an opening of his eyes to divine truth; a guidance of him into the very path thou prayest night and day he may enter? And to more, perchance, than to him, whose eternal welfare is as dear to thee as thine own. Perchance, if it so please the Most High, it may be to the salvation of the unfortunate Princess, thy lord's sister, herself. Weep no more, my daughter. No, not even for thy lost and beloved sister, the pure virgin of Armorica. She is in His hands also, Who knoweth, better than we, poor finite worms, why it has been permitted that she should be taken from us. It may be for His more signal glory. Perchance, even the redemption of her oppressed country from the wiles of that archfiend of cunning and malice.'

The young Queen, comforted by this spiritual counsel, regained her courage; lost more through the physical weakness which grief and terror had produced than through any faltering of high-placed trust. When she took the holy Prelate to see the young Prince, they found him so far revived as to be able to lie propped up with cushions on his couch, taking with much relish the food with which Nurtia was tenderly feeding him. The Princess was also more quiet, but uneasy and moaning.

Prince Sigismer, when he had this for answer to his anxious inquiries, clutched the francisque he held in his hand, and swore frightful vengeance on the traitors who had reduced her to such a state.

The next day arrived a messenger from the King. All had gone well. They had arrived in time to release the Burgundian King from his perilous position, and had pursued Count Hagan in his turn, whilst the unfortunate Gondemar, taking refuge in a tower from the close pursuit of the angry King his brother, had perished miserably. Gundovald, deaf to everything but the voice of his rage, had had the lower part of the tower filled with combustibles, and had, he was sorry to say, burnt him alive before he could get there in time to oppose the savage act. Godegesil had not joined the conspiracy, and was safe at Besançon. Then came the promise of return in another week or ten days, as soon as the country was once more peaceably settled, and the few remaining rebels reduced to obedience.

Anxiously as the Queen looked forward to the return of Chlovis, still she dreaded not his anger but his distress at the disastrous news which awaited him. She would fain have sent him word, had not the messenger told her that it was impossible for him to say in what direction he was to be found. A letter, however, was despatched by this messenger from the Queen to Avitus, giving him the whole account of the violent capture of Iërne, and the heroic conduct of the young Prince and his companions, and praying him to use his best efforts to the King of the Franks to soften the mournful tale. Chlotildis prayed fervently that this letter might reach in time to prepare the King for the misfortune which had befallen in his absence. Could he but learn it from the lips of Avitus, she felt well assured that the fervent piety of that venerable Prelate would enable him to soothe the distress it would be to Chlovis, and rob the blow of half the bitterness.

This letter despatched, the Queen and the priest Lupus devoted themselves to the wretched Llantildis, whom they tried to draw out of the depths of despair into which she

seemed plunged. She sat for hours without uttering a word or moving, except every now and then when she looked at the door with frightened eyes as if she expected some one to enter whom she yet dreaded to see.

‘It is worse than remorse, my son,’ said the Archbishop, in answer to a suggestion of the priest Lupus; ‘it is the despair of a soul bound in the fetters of Satan, delivered over even in this life to the tormentors, ever goading her with the remembrance of her crimes, assuring her that there is no forgiveness for her either in this world or the world to come. She listens to thy voice the most willingly, my son. If thou canst but once reach the portals of her heart, and induce her to open her ears and hear the voice of Christ the Lord saying to her, “Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and I will enlighten thee,” then all would be well with her. Had she been a Catholic and not a cold heretical Arian, the task with her had been easier. Would she but once listen to the assurance that the precious Blood of Christ, Who died for the vilest of us all, can cleanse her soul from guilt, would she not accept it as a message from heaven?’

It was a fortunate thing for all concerned that Chlovis went round to see the Archbishop of Vienne before his return home. It was a mere wish which took him there, a desire to see the man to whom he chiefly owed the priceless gift of his sweet and pious wife, as well as to greet him from his spiritual daughter and beg for her a greeting in return, and which he knew would be as welcome as it was precious to her. How tenderly, how gently, the holy man broke the dreadful tidings to him; how he had assuaged his first burst of wrath, comforted his despair, was to be seen on his return to Soissons, the last words of Avitus ringing in his ears.

‘Go, my son, the obedient son of our holy mother the Catholic Church, who blesses thee by my hands, laid on thy head. Go, armed with the assurance that in punishing these men and wresting from their wicked hands that unfortunate country and restoring it to the true Faith, to which it heretofore belonged, thou art fighting the battle of the most high God,



Who will prosper thee in this most righteous work. And should it not be His holy will that thou shouldst be permitted to rescue the gentle and pious virgin and transmit her to the peaceful refuge of our Lady at Geneva, guard thee well against vain fretting and calling in question the divine counsels. Be thou sure that whatever befalls her mortal life, her immortal life is in His safe keeping.'

'It might have been thyself, my own true wife,' said the King, as Chlotildis lay clasped to his breast, her sweet eyes moist with tears of profound gratitude to see him so resigned, so composed. Her lips moved in fervent prayers of thanksgiving, although she well knew that he was only returned home to start again for a desperate struggle with a desperate man, who could but be fully aware of the heavy vengeance about to fall on him.

'My trusty Chararic! my valiant Sigismer!' he said, as he met them in the council room; 'it is a sorry business. You do not doubt me when I say that my first thought was for you both, grieved as I was to have laid this heavy burden on you. Valiant comrades, we must wash out this affront in their blood. Once he dared me with cunning wiles; now he has used weapons we understand better, as he will find to his cost.'

But a severer trial than any he had yet experienced awaited the forbearance of the King before he departed on his expedition of vengeance, and, as he also hoped, of rescue. Lupus had so far succeeded in his unremitting efforts with the Princess Llantildis, as to lead her to contemplate a possible forgiveness and washing away of sins in the cleansing waters of Baptism and the healing Blood of the Son of God. He had done much, but he had yet to convince her of sorrow for sin, and lead her to true repentance.

'Repentance,' he said to her, 'is not merely remorse for thy sin; it is such a comprehension of the horror of thy crime as will convince thee no act of humiliation is too great for it. What if thy royal brother never forgive thee? The Most High will grant thee pardon, and His peace will return to thy soul. But, if thou layest not the load of thy guilt at the feet of

Christ the Lord, by revealing to the King the innocence of the guiltless Frigildis, and the share thou hadst in the treachery which betrayed his unoffending captive into the remorseless hands of the chief of rebellion, thy sin clings to thee. I know all thou canst say of the shame, the degradation; but unless thou canst humble thyself to the dust before the offended majesty of the Most High, and nail thyself to the cross of degradation and shame He holds out to thee, thou mayest not hope that the precious Blood shed on such a cross will be poured out for the cleansing of thy soul. Did He shrink from the shame and degradation it was to hang on the cross of a malefactor, crucified between malefactors, numbered with them? He Who did no sin, neither was guile found on His lips.'

'I will, I will confess all to him,' said the vanquished Llantildis. 'Oh! take me to Chlovis, let me tell him all, all! Perhaps he will kill me, compassionating my misery.'

'Not so, my daughter; courage! Thy misery will vanish like the clouds of night before the rays of the rising sun the moment thou hast confessed thy sin and acknowledged the justice of thy punishment. Was not the thief pardoned on the cross? And know thou that instant pardon and peace will follow a like confession and acknowledgment on thy part.'

It was the afternoon of the day before that on which the King was to start for the Armorican frontier. When Lupus told the Queen of the salutary disposition of the Princess Llantildis, she hesitated for an instant, fearing such a confession might disturb the King too much on the eve of such an important mission.

'Seek not to delay, my daughter,' answered Lupus; 'remember her soul is in peril. This step once taken, the dew of heaven will descend on her heart. If it be delayed, what is there to keep her heart from becoming still more barren and hard than before? What is even the success of the enterprise on which the King is bound, to the death of an immortal soul? Hasten, my daughter; seek thy lord, and with thy sweetest and most wifely accents of humility and grace, beseech him to have mercy, and not give way to wrath.'

Even the high courage of the great Chlovis failed for a moment as he listened to the awful confessions of the sister he so loved, now prostrate on the floor at his feet, her golden hair dishevelled on her shoulders, no careful comb of the murdered Myrrha passed through it, no glossing, smoothing brush, no softening perfume, no anointing oil. He bowed his head on his arms folded on the table before him, and groaned aloud.

‘My lord! my lord!’ pleaded the sweet accents of the young Queen, kneeling at his side, her lovely white arms clasping his strong right arm; ‘I beseech you, remember your promise to me. Do not give way to despair. See, it is of the past. God in His mercy has blessed you greatly since. As you are great, my lord, pardon, pardon; for she is your sister, and she has sinned through affection for you and uncurbed human passion. My lord, it is human to err, and like God Himself to forgive. Oh, raise her up with your pitying hand, lest she die at your feet in despair.’

‘Llantildis,’ said the King, slowly rising, and taking his sister up from the ground, ‘my poor sister Llantildis! What it must have cost thee before thou couldst humble thyself to this! Great indeed must be the power of this same Catholic Church thus to subdue a haughty spirit like thine. Go in peace, poor maiden,’ he continued, kissing her on the forehead. ‘I will do my best to forget every word of this as if it never had been. If I do not succeed as entirely and as soon as thou couldst wish, remember I am yet in the shadow of heathendom, and thou art already far on thy way into the bosom of the Church of Chlotildis.’

This scene, so painful to all, was hardly over, when a messenger arrived in all haste from Orleans, bringing intelligence of a fresh inroad of the Armoricans. They had ravaged the new gathered corn, carried off the new brewed mead, and when hotly pursued, had stopped and drunk it on the spot, singing the while, leaving the empty casks broken and spoilt, and had then retreated devastating with a high hand, as if in defiance of every one.

‘Runs their pride so high?’ said the King. ‘I thank them for this fresh occasion of visiting them with a signal chastisement.’

The King and Sigismer were to enter Armorica from the north, whilst Ethelbert and Athanaric were to come up with their division from the south, through the country they had traversed on their former journey of exploration. As they were to work their way to the north, and the King to the south, they would eventually meet, and, they hoped, inclose Gwench’lan’s forces, and oblige them to defend themselves. The policy of the Armorican chief, so felt the King, would be to slip past them, elude the battle, and tire them out by flying before them, a not unusual mode of warfare with that people. The Antrusion was in command of a division advancing from the eastern frontier, lest the enemy should adopt a sudden resolution, and, passing behind the King in that direction into the territory of Gaul, attack him in the rear, in the hope of driving him back into the more inaccessible regions of the west, towards the shores of the Atlantic.

The Queen was to take leave of the King at Clermont, on the Armorican frontier, where the Archbishop Remigius was going to consecrate a new church. She would return to Rheims under the charge of the Prelate, where she would continue, in the King’s absence, in the retirement of the Convent of our Lady in that city. Here she would be joined by the Princess Llantildis, accompanied by the priest Lupus, preparing her to receive the rites of holy Baptism, also to be administered to her during that time.

The division of the King was to go forward that evening, nor halt on the march till it reached the Armorican frontier, where the King would join them. Before starting from Soissons, Aurelian had made arrangements with the Archbishop that he should accompany the King to the church at Clermont, in time for Vespers if possible. There he would give to him his francisque, especially blessed for this expedition to overthrow the power of Gwench’lan. At the Queen’s request, he had caused to be inserted in the handle of that redoubtable

weapon<sup>1</sup> some filings of the chain which fell from the venerable hands of St. Peter at the bidding of the angel sent to deliver him from the prison of Herod. Sigismer was also to accompany the King, and as soon as the arrangements for the march were completed, they all set off in the direction of Clermont.

'I am afraid we are late,' said Sigismer; 'I should be sorry if the service were over. It is meet before we start on an expedition against the enemies of the Church, to seek the blessing of that Church on our enterprise.'

'I hope it may be begun, at all events,' said the King.

'Why, my good lord?' asked Aurelian; 'would it not show our greater respect to be there in time for the commencement?'

'Because,' answered Clovis, 'I mean to accept the first words I hear on entering as a presage of our good or evil fortune in this enterprise. So I pray you both, comrades, mark well what those words may happen to be.'

'We will,' they said earnestly, this mode of consulting the oracle, as it was called, being familiar to them—a sort of divination in great favour with the King.

The ceremony of the consecration of a church, bordering so closely on the confines of a territory at present groaning under the tyranny of Gwench'lan, even within hearing of the awful rites of heathendom which he had re-established, had been judged by the Archbishop worthy of an unusual display of solemn pomp. Many of the neighbouring bishops and clergy had been invited to attend, and the appearance of the church at the celebration of Mass had offered a striking spectacle. The addition at Vespers of myriads of lights had increased the splendour, and a profusion of wax tapers placed behind the high altar brought it out in prominent relief. A magnificent spiral canopy, or ciborium,<sup>2</sup> of cloth of gold, hung over the altar, supported by four pillars, rising at the top in the form of an inverted cup, terminated by a cross<sup>3</sup> sparkling with jewels. Beneath this ciborium was suspended a golden

<sup>1</sup> Alban Butler, *Lives of the Saints*.

<sup>2</sup> Abbé Guillois, Explic. art. 'Ciboire.'

<sup>3</sup> Krazer, p. 180.

dove containing the Blessed Eucharist, reserved at Mass and placed there by the Archbishop, who was the celebrant. Between gold candelabra, in which burnt innumerable lights, were placed costly vases filled with flowers, shedding a brilliant glow of variegated colour on the altar, and mingling their delicate perfume with that of the incense, ascending in veiling clouds from the censers, swung by acolytes vested in crimson and white. Sacred music and chanted psalmody rose in majestic chords to the vaulted roof, whilst the assembled multitude, on their knees, bowed in reverential devotion.

*Virgam virtutis tuæ emittet Dominus ex Sion; dominare in medio inimicorum tuorum.*<sup>4</sup>

So chanted the singers, celebrating the exaltation of Christ. Aurelian looked at the King, whose eyes kindled with grateful exultation. Both could not fail to interpret these words as a presage of divine aid to his arms, as a promise of victory over the enemies of Christ. The three warriors bared their heads and bowed their knees in devout thanksgiving. The Vespers over, they rose and went up towards the high altar.

The appearance in the church of three men fully equipped for war created no small commotion amongst the assembled people as they advanced up the nave, their gleaming armour catching the lights at a thousand points. The commotion increased tenfold when every one recognized the King. Chlovis stole a long loving look at his young wife, where she knelt fervently praying for the divine protection to her husband and lord. But her sweet face was hidden in her hands, the brown golden waves of her silken hair falling over them.

Arrived before the altar, Chlovis knelt down, Aurelian and Sigismer standing behind him. The Archbishop then took the francisque from off the altar, where it had lain all day, and giving it into his hands, said—

‘Take this consecrated weapon, my son, from the hands of the Catholic Church of Christ, and may the virtue of the sacred relic inclosed in it cause the fetters of superstition and sin to

<sup>4</sup> Psalm cix. 2.

fall off from the enslaved people, as the fetters with which sinful men had loaded the sacred hands of the blessed Peter fell at the approach of the messenger of God. Thou hast the blessing of the Most High on thine enterprise, my son. Go! fight the battles of the Lord of Hosts, and may it please Him to prosper thee in all thy undertakings, and bring thee back crowned with honour and victory.'

Chlovis took the weapon, kissing with filial reverence the hand which gave it. He then rose and went down the church, seeking again with his eyes a last farewell of his beautiful young Queen. He found her awaiting him outside the church. He took her in his arms, tenderly embracing her.

'Courage, my sweet love,' he said; 'I have been in worse straits than this. This is but a skirmish compared to other wars. It is only that I am anxious to succeed so fully in this that I have prepared for it a little more carefully than usual. Hast thou a message for my beautiful captive, sweet? Cheer up! Soon I shall bring her back to thee; would it might be in her bridal garments.'

Giving her in charge to the Archbishop, who now joined them, the King leapt into his saddle, and, waving another farewell to the Queen, set off at a fast trot, accompanied by his two companions.

Ethelbert and Athanaric had succeeded beyond their hopes in winding their way uninterrupted up to the neighbourhood of the sacred oak forest, where the former of the two friends had met Iërne. They had been joined by the fugitive Catholics anxiously expecting them. From them they learnt that Gwench'lan was more powerful than ever, such prestige had he regained by the success of his daring recapture of the Princess, dimmed though that success had been by the loss of several of his chiefs and most intimate counsellors. He and the young King Budik were now with a large force, not far from Alençon, concentrating their power to resist the King, of whose approach they were perfectly aware. So audacious was Gwench'lan, so boastful in his threats, that he was actually preparing, they said, to celebrate the high autumnal festival in

the very teeth of the advancing King, and they would, for that purpose, assemble in a few days in the great oak forest towards which they were now advancing. They could give no precise account of the whereabouts of the Princess Iërne; they might be sure she was not far from Gwench'lan, wherever he was. Some said he had shut her up in a secret cave, and only brought her out when she had to officiate in some of their mystic rites.

'Thou mayest be certain that is the very cave in which thou wert shut up, Ethelbert,' said Athanaric, to whom his foster brother had related some of his adventures in his first visit to Armorica, now there was no longer any motive for concealing them; 'I wish we knew where it was.'

'That is somewhat more difficult to accomplish than thou mayest suppose,' replied Ethelbert. 'One part of our enterprise would be easy enough could we but obtain that same information.'

'Stand!' cried Athanaric. 'There is the gleam of armour through the trees. They are Bretons, too.'

'Steal round the wood that way, comrades, and cut them off!' said Ethelbert to some of his companions. 'Athanaric and I will compass them on this side. We must be nearing the King's division; they are retreating before it.'

'How vexatious, they have slipped through our fingers somehow!' said Athanaric, taking off his helmet and wiping his forehead, as half an hour later the two parties met again, somewhat in the rear of the point where they had caught a glimpse of the Breton party.

'Never mind!' answered Ethelbert. We have cut them off from the place where they meant to break through. They have escaped neither left nor right, but have fallen backwards. It is better we did not come to blows. They do not seem to know that we are advancing from this side; perhaps they fancy the King's division is the only one.'

'We are upon them!' cried one of the King's party, riding up. 'We have seen them. The King has sent round to intercept them. Prince Sigismer and the Lord Aurelian



are on that duty. The King is coming up on the right. If I met you, I was to tell you to draw round the forest to the left, extend round as far as you can, and drive them to the open ground at the rear, where they must turn and fight us.'

The manœuvres of the King had so far succeeded, that before noon next day his warriors stood in two thirds of a circle round the Bretons, whom they had gradually driven back to a tract of open country, standing as it were in the midst of two forests. There had been some pretty sharp fighting in the morning, when the Bretons had tried to break through the inclosing Franks, and the blood of these latter was now fairly up.

'Look sharp, there, Athanaric!' shouted Ethelbert, as a band of mounted Bretons came sweeping down towards the place where they stood, followed closely by Chlovis and his division. A fierce skirmish ensued, and the Bretons retreated, fighting furiously, pressed on both sides by the King and Ethelbert.

And now the battle began in earnest. Surrounded on all sides by the gradually inclosing Franks, the Bretons poured out of the forest into the open country, followed closely by their adversaries, fighting for every inch of ground. Conspicuous above them all, and where the battle raged most fiercely, rode Gwench'lan on a coal-black horse, himself a tall powerful figure, looking gigantic in his black armour inlaid with gold, the fiery-throated dragon, the crest of Pendragon, from whom he boasted his descent, breathing defiance, towering with wide-spread and baleful wings over his dark helmet. A golden collar, or gorget, the distinctive mark of an Armorican chief of high rank, was round his neck. His right arm swung a ponderous mace, which brought horse and rider to the ground with fatal precision. Prince Sigismer caught sight of him.

'Tis he! the chief of rebellion! Stay, traitor!' he shouted, as he rushed upon him. 'Merovæus! Merovæus! the white sea horse!'

A sudden rush of the Bretons bore Sigismer back from the intended onset, then carried him on again, he all the while fighting desperately, and hard beset by the Bretons swarming round him like angry wasps ; Aurelian, his shield uplifted high, the figure of our Blessed Lady revealed to the sight of all and gleaming like a standard, rushed to his rescue.

'Sancta Maria ! Mater Dei !' was his cry, as he swooped down upon Gwench'lan, now close before him. And backwards and forwards swayed the combatants, as the footmen rushed in between them.

The battle raged on all sides. Ethelbert made prodigious efforts to reach Gwench'lan, whom he could see from a distance, but he was as often borne back, Athanaric ever at his side, hewing a path before them, which closed up behind. Twice Gwench'lan was within reach of the King, and twice he was separated from him in the struggle. It was a hand to hand fight, and everywhere in the thickest of the battle gleamed the white sea horse, the silver shield of Aurelian, and the white ermine lying in the heart of the cross. When Gwench'lan, borne back by the tide of battle from his duel with Aurelian, caught sight of this device of Ethelbert, he burned with fury to see this significant symbol of the future designed for his country, and rushed upon the young Frank to batter it in with his death-dealing mace.

'At last !' said Ethelbert, as he sprang to meet him, clearing his path to him with his francisque. The blows of the two warriors rang like hammers on an anvil, but not one stroke of the Breton mace fell on the white ermine lying on the cross, which Ethelbert lifted high above his head.

'Iërne ! Iërne !' he shouted, as he wheeled again and again to take Gwench'lan at a vantage.

'All is lost !' shouted the young King Budik, as he rode up to Gwench'lan. 'The Frank wolf ravins on the plain, the cowards fly before him. To the cave ! Let us take the Princess and fly ! We can rally again farther west !

Dealing a tremendous blow at Ethelbert, Gwench'lan darted off on the track of Budik, closely followed by Athanaric

and Ethelbert, still reeling from the effects of the Breton mace, which had lighted full upon the helmet it would have cloven had it not been of such good proof.

Embarrassed by their ignorance of the paths through the trees, the two friends could only follow by the sound of their flying foes, as they crashed through the branches. All at once the sounds ceased, and they feared they had escaped, as they entered what Ethelbert recognized as the inclosure where stood the high altar, before which Iërne had chanted the hymn to the goddess Ceridwen. Here Gwench'lan suddenly reappeared, carrying a figure, which the two friends at once knew to be the Armorican Princess. He was followed by the young King, and they both made for the western side of the inclosure, towards a path leading into the depths of the forest.

The two friends were too quick for them. Throwing themselves in their front they forced them to turn, and resolutely barred all passage to the path they would have followed. Closing fiercely with his adversary, Ethelbert tried to tear from him the maiden, now fallen on his arm, and greatly impeding his movements, whilst Athanaric, on his side, fought with King Budik, and kept him from going to the aid of Gwench'lan. A loud crashing was heard in the wood, the battle cry of Aurelian, the war shout of the King, and Gwench'lan, knowing that a fresh reinforcement to his present opponents could not but end in his defeat, if not capture, and mad with fury to think they would gain the Princess, drew his long knife, and shouting, 'Thou mayest have her dead, but never alive!' plunged the weapon into the breast of the unfortunate maiden, who would have fallen to the ground as he cast her from him, had not Ethelbert caught her in his arms, at the same moment that Athanaric succeeded in bringing King Budik to the ground by a well-dealt blow of his francisque.

'She is dead!' said Athanaric, as he knelt down beside Ethelbert, who upheld the head of the dying Iërne, whom he had laid on the grass, supporting her in his arms, and vainly

trying to staunch with her veil the blood fast welling from the wound.

'No, not dead! Oh, seek the Lord Aurelian, Athanaric!'

'He is here, noble Ethelbert! what is amiss?' asked Aurelian, as he came upon the fatal scene.

At this moment Ierne spoke faintly. Ethelbert, bending down, listening anxiously, heard her murmur with a low hollow voice—

'Oh, that the cleansing waters of Baptism were poured over my soul!'

'There is water under the arch of the stone altar,' said Ethelbert. 'I saw it sparkling there that night. Fill thy helmet, Athanaric!' Haste thee, comrade!'

'Take mine, Athanaric! It is consecrated for the purpose,' said Aurelian. 'Ah! I hear the water trickling!'

Athanaric hastened to the arch of the stone altar, under which, as was often the case with the Druidical altars, was a well of clear water, fed by a spring trickling into it. He returned immediately, bearing the golden helmet filled with pure limpid water. Aurelian, taking it, dipped his right hand like a cup into it, and pouring the water over the head and face of the dying Ierne, baptized her in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Revived, as by a miracle, for an instant, with the freshness of the pure water, Ierne half raised herself for a moment, gazed earnestly into the eyes of the still kneeling Ethelbert, and then, as if exhausted by the effort, sank back into his supporting arms, and died with a lovely smile irradiating her pale countenance.

As Gwench'lan was about to burst forth from the inclosure, he was met face to face by the King on foot, his horse, as he pursued the flying Bretons through the wood, having fallen in the path, where he now lay disabled.

'Ah!' said the King, at the sight of his grim enemy thus within his reach; 'by the holy Martin of Tours, I am right glad to have thee within arm's length at last. Now will the hoofs of the White Sea Horse trample out the life from the

head of the Dragon<sup>5</sup> beneath them ! foul traitor and robber as thou art !'

Gwench'lan stepped back a pace as if startled with the sudden apparition of the warlike figure before him and gazed into the wrathful countenance of the King, fully displayed by the bright moonlight, with a glare of savage hatred. Then recovering himself he swung his mace with his powerful arm, and it came sweeping down as if he meant to crush at one blow the white sea horse rearing on the King's helmet. Chlovis, watching him with a steadfast eye, met the rapid descent of the weighty mace by an upward stroke of his redoubtable francisque, sending it flying from the hand of his enemy. Before the King could shorten his francisque for a blow at the now unguarded head of Gwench'lan, this last sprang at Chlovis, trying to close with him and stab him with his long knife, still reeking with the blood of Iërne. But the King was as quick as he was. With a rapid movement he changed his francisque to his left hand, and seizing his enemy by the golden gorget he wore, he shook him from him with a powerful grasp, and hurled him to the ground. Stunned with the violence of such a throw, Gwench'lan lay where he had fallen, as if he would never rise more.

'Bind him securely,' said the King to some of the Franks who now came up. 'Mind he is a subtle enemy; he will give us the slip if he can.'

Entering farther into the inclosure, the group around the dead Iërne met his view. Ethelbert still held her in his arms, whilst Aurelian gazed into her face in the vain hope of discovering some sign of life.

'She is at peace,' he said, as the King approached; 'she is at rest with Christ the Lord for evermore.'

'This is sorry work,' said the King. 'I had hoped to rescue thee, sweet maiden, to bring thee back in thy bridal dress, not in this ensanguined shroud.'

'She is arrayed in her bridal garment,' replied Aurelian, 'even in the robe of the justice of her Heavenly Bridegroom, to Whom she is now for evermore espoused.'

<sup>5</sup> Pendragon.

‘Make a litter of branches, comrades,’ said the King to the Franks now entering the inclosure. ‘We must take her back to the Queen, according to my word. Aurelian, to thy care, and that of my noble Ethelbert, I give the charge of this beautiful corpse. My valiant comrade,’ he said to Ethelbert, ‘this is but a poor recompense for thy devoted love.’

Not a word escaped from the lips of Ethelbert as, the litter finished, he helped the King and Aurelian to lay the dead body of his beloved lady on the bier, first placing upon it the shield of the white ermine, which inclosed her tall and slender form like a cradle. Aurelian crossed her hands on her breast, and the King unfastening his cloak, which the Queen had embroidered for him, spread it over her like a pall, reverentially covering her face. The head of the bier rested on the shoulders of Ethelbert, whilst Athanaric bore the feet, Chlovis supporting it on one side and Aurelian on the other. Sigismar met and joined the sorrowful procession as it defiled through the trees and reached the open ground, the comrades of Ethelbert chanting as they went, in mournful accents, Aurelian responding to them verse by verse in holier strains.

*Franks.* Dark and lone will rest thy head,  
Winds low wailing ;  
Tears for thee, sweet maiden dead,  
Naught availing.

*Aurelian.* Angels claim her for their own,  
Glad hymns singing ;  
She from earth to Christ is flown,  
Heavenward winging.

*Franks.* Love shall seek thee, gentle maid,  
Vainly weeping ;  
Low in grave must thou be laid,  
Ever sleeping.

*Aurelian.* Nigh the Golden Throne she stands,  
Heav’n’s bells ringing ;  
Virgin lilies in her hands,  
Saints palms bringing.

*Franks.* When in earth we've laid our love,  
Swords fierce flashing,  
Shall revenge our murd' red dove,  
Shields loud clashing.

*Aurelian.* High in heav'n triumphant psalm,  
Peace is telling ;  
There she bears the victor's palm ;  
With Christ dwelling.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### *Christmas Day* A.D. 496.

THE mortal remains of the pure and gentle Iërne slept in the garden of the Convent of our Lady at Soissons, under the east wall, where she had sat with the novice Agatha the day of her first capture, whilst from the edges of the stone which marked the spot, sprang white violets, symbols, as she herself had said, of the newly-baptized, cherished and watered by those who had known and loved her. The Archbishop Remigius had consecrated the spot whilst her body rested in the chapel, where the supplicating litanies for the divine protection over her had gone up on that sorrowful night of her abduction from the garden of the convent. The rites of Christian burial over one rescued, even in the jaws of death, from the bondage of Pagan darkness, took place in the presence of the Queen, Aurelian, and the clergy of Soissons. Ethelbert and Athanaric were admitted, as a recognition of all they had done for the beloved dead, who had purchased with her blood, as she had prayed she might, the redemption of her country from the slavery and tyranny of the enemies of God.

Chlovis, on his return from Armorica, approved of all that was done, going himself to see the peaceful grave, and taking Ethelbert with him. Both felt the sanctity and the serenity of this quiet resting-place, and stood in the setting sun of a bright afternoon looking on in silence. At last the King said to the young Frank—

‘I have chosen thee as Graf of the towns which the Armoricans have ceded to me on their borders. It is but fit thou shouldst guard the frontier of a country for whose



ransom thou hast paid so dearly. It is a reward also for thy valour.'

'Is it a reward thou seekest to bestow on me, lord King? I pray thee let it be that I should remain, as heretofore, captain of the east guard. It is not far from this spot, for ever sacred to me. It would be something to pass it in my rounds of duty day and night, and to have the guard of a grave so precious to me would be the greatest boon I could ask.'

'As thou wilt, comrade,' said the King, after a pause, for he felt that the young man was in earnest in his plea. 'Yet let not this great sorrow gain the mastery over thy brave heart. I may not well spare thy strong arm and high courage in the battlefield. Time will soften this great loss to thee. Some day thou mayest meet another maiden, not perhaps so lovely and queenlike as my beautiful captive, but one who will yet console thee for her loss.'

'I grieve not for her death, my lord King,' returned Ethelbert. 'It was a glorious death—the very end for which she prayed. My arms, which have been the resting-place in death of one so noble, so beloved, may never inclose another. I would be allowed at all times to accompany thee when thou goest to seek glory over thine enemies. Yet I seek not for death, even on the battlefield. I would live to glorify her name by my fame and valour. She is not dead to me, my lord King. She is ever near me, her presence ever breathing sweet influence over me. There is one farther boon I would crave of thy gracious favour.'

'Say on, valiant comrade. Whatever it may be, sure I am it is worthy thy noble nature.'

'My lord King, I would become a Catholic, in fulfilment of the last prayer which the noble maiden addressed to me.'

Chlovis looked into the earnest face of the young warrior, gazing down on the white marble slab and long cross which, and nothing more, was engraved on it. Taking the hand of Ethelbert, he grasped it with a fervent pressure.

'So be it, valiant comrade,' he said; 'be thou as my forerunner in this act of fealty to the God of thy royal lady

and Queen, my beloved spouse. It may not perchance be long ere we follow on the same path.'

Ethelbert was baptized, but before he received that holy sacrament which admitted him into the communion of saints with his dead Ierne, Prince Sigismer departed for the East, taking with him as his bride the Princess Llantildis. Her marriage was not the triumphant glorification to herself which she had dreamed of in days gone past. Her pride was for ever humbled, and though assured by her spiritual teacher of pardon for her cruelty, all the events consequent on her act of treachery to the inoffending Ierne were so many sharp reminders to her of her crime. It would have been almost a mercy to have allowed her to carry out her fervent wishes, inspired by her penitence, to confess everything to Prince Sigismer and then retire into a convent. But the King overruled the Archbishop, and, what was more, his gentle Queen, both earnestly praying him to yield to her wishes.

'It is a desirable marriage,' he said; 'it strengthens my hands, extends my influence. It would also be a great disappointment to my valiant kinsman. I know his heart is set upon her. Use rather thy best persuasions, my sweet wife, to prevail on her to give up the idea. Tell her to make a good and loving wife to Sigismer. I ask it of her affection for me, and I will ever be to her, what I was before any of these things happened, her loving brother. Believe me, she will thank us all for it by and bye. New scenes, new homage, amongst those who know nothing of the past, will wear away her present distaste to the world. Some day she will come back to see us, the happy wife of a warrior as noble-minded as he is valiant.'

Before long it was again known in the palace that another young Prince might be expected. This was a great satisfaction to every one, and a great delight to the Prince Theodoric, who 'did hope this little brother would not die like the other. It was such a shame, after expecting him so long.' It was a thought of much anxiety to the young Queen, a subject of much fervent prayer and supplication, that she might be permitted to have a son, who would survive to serve God as a

true Catholic Prince. She almost feared the King would not suffer him to be baptized a Catholic, for as the time drew near for his birth a sort of superstitious dread seemed to make Chlovis hesitate in acceding to the Queen's prayers and entreaties that he would keep his promise, and allow her to dedicate her child to God. He consented at last, and one beautiful morning in the late spring of 496 the young Prince was baptized by the name of Chlodomir. Scarcely had this been done when, to the great consternation of all, the infant sickened, and gave every sign that it was about to share the same fate that overtook the firstborn Ingomer.

The poor young Queen thought her cup of sorrow full, and her distress could not be greater. But terror was added to her grief when she heard the King say, in the first outburst of his anguish and vexation—'It could not be otherwise; he will die presently as his brother did, having been baptized in the name of thy Christ.'

This was intense grief to the pious Chlotildis, who saw about to vanish from before her eyes the greatest hope of her life, the one chief blessing for which she had so striven and prayed. But for the support of Remigius at this moment of supreme sorrow, even her great faith might have given way under the severe trial it was to her. But her prayers and the prayers of the Catholic Church prevailed, and the child recovered, amidst the fervent thanksgivings of the Queen and to the unbounded joy of the King.

'Ask me anything thou wilt,' he said to her, as the child, now perfectly recovered, lay on the bosom of his joyful mother. 'I did wrong to distrust thee and add to thy sorrow by upbraiding thee, as if it were thy fault he was ill.'

'Nay, my lord! Both his illness and your royal anger were decreed by God to try my faith in Him. It is I who well nigh failed in my trust, and almost brought this chastisement upon me. Nevertheless, if you will in your kingly goodness grant me a boon, good my lord, let it be an offering of great thankfulness to Him Who in the midst of wrath hast remembered mercy, even the offering of your own heart, my gracious lord.'

Can you refuse to give up your false idols, in return for so much compassion as He has shown to us this day ?'

'Fairest and best of women, it is not now the hour in which I can do this thing. But let thy prayers ascend for me night and day to thy God, for now is come the hour of still further trial to thee and of great emergency for me.'

'Oh, my lord,' said Chlotildis, in anxious alarm, 'what is this thing you speak of? But I know if your heart is but towards God, that He will deliver you from all danger.'

'Thou must hear now, sweet wife, what I have to tell thee. Even this morning I received a message from Siegbert of Cologne, bidding me prepare quickly to go to his aid. The Alemanni are mustering in great numbers on both sides of the Rhine and the Maine, some have even crossed the frontier of Austrasia, whilst another body have attacked Siegbert himself, penetrated as far as Cologne, but were driven back by a successful sally. I must hasten to meet them ere they advance farther. They hope to crush me. They are jealous of this great nation of the Franks which I have established in this fair province of Gaul. They envy the prosperity and riches arising around us. They mean to try and dislodge us, so that they may take to themselves the glorious spoils of the Roman Empire to which we have succeeded by right of the inheritance of faithful alliance. It will be a desperate struggle. I have long foreseen it. I am not sorry the moment is come; for once beaten back and scattered as I mean to scatter them, they will never be able to muster against me as they are now doing. I mean to break their confidence, and show them that their ancient foes, the freemen of Germany, are still their conquerors; that to us, the allies and heirs of ancient Rome, belongs alone the empire, the glory, and the civilization of Rome. For them, mere barbarians as they are, who have never known her glorious institutions, have never fought for Rome, never revered her glory, her learning, her policy, her government, let them return to the wild forests from which they swarm, and swill the pale beer they distil from their fir trees, till they are reduced to the condition of the swine who herd in those impenetrable depths.'

As he spoke, the eyes of Chlovis blazed with wrath. He stood, his head proudly erect, his forehead resembled a rock of adamant, against which all the wild hordes of the Hercynian forests might dash themselves in vain. Chlotildis had never seen him look more royal. He felt himself the father of his young kingdom, of the companions he was gradually moulding into the people of that kingdom, the sole protector of all that was beginning to take a form under the patient exercise of his great sagacity. He was not only determined to hurl back this wave of benighted barbarism, bringing ruin and desolation in its train; but he felt equal to it, and his swelling nostrils, like those of a war horse, scented the war and victory from afar.

‘My gracious lord, and great King!’ said the Queen, rising, her baby Prince still cradled in her soft white arms, ‘you are going to conquest; but in order to be victorious, invoke the God of the Christians. He is the sole Lord of the universe, and is styled the Lord of armies. If you address yourself to Him with confidence, nothing can resist you. Though your enemies were a hundred against one, you would triumph over them.’

Chlovis gazed into her face, upturned to his, beaming with fervour, pious enthusiasm, and heavenly faith. Passing his strong arm round her, he drew her gently towards him, and tenderly kissed her.

‘I will not forget, sweet wife! Thou art indeed my guardian angel. Under the sign of the Cross will I conquer, like the great Constantine of old. I shall return to thee in triumph to be baptized, to make all thy sons kings and thy daughters the wives of kings. Take care of my little one. He is so small, I fear to hurt him. There, lift him thyself to my lips, though I fear my lip fringe may scratch his soft face,’ he continued, smiling. Chlotildis lifted the infant, her heart filled with rapturous thanksgiving, pouring itself out in mental prayer, whilst the stern warrior, stooping down, kissed the baby cheek with the softness of a woman’s touch.

‘My dearest wife,’ he said, rising again to his height, ‘thou wilt depart for Rheims this day. Only a few guards can I

leave in any city or town under my protection. Therefore, thou wilt retire again to the convent, where thou wilt pray to thy God for me, for success to my arms is the sole protection to thee, my dearest. Nay, do not weep. Remember, thou art the wife of a warrior going forth against his enemies and thine, of a King going to do battle for his people. There, that is as it should be ; smile on me, beloved. Fare thee well, sweet one, for thou wilt not see me again till I return to thee a conqueror and a Catholic.

Again the streets of Soissons rang with the din of warlike preparation. Chief after chief rode in with his companions or retainers. The Grafs came in with three-fourths of their respective guards. The Antrusion Chararic led the King's own body guard, whilst Ethelbert and Athanaric rode at the head of a large body recruited from the southern frontiers. The place of meeting was in the Field of Mars, and there Chlovis received and welcomed his friends and allies as they came up 'to the feast of battle.' There were the usual names, Ragnacair of Cambray, Regnomer of Mans, Carnaric of Dispargum, and his son, Chlodimir, Chilperic the Merovingian, with a goodly number of armed followers. It was a splendid array, well appointed, well equipped, which filed along the road to Laon, on their way to join King Siegbert at Cologne. At the head of the army rode Chlovis, triumph already in his eyes, and by his side, Aurelian, ever ready to support him with his arm or his counsel. Arrived at Cologne, the King was met by his cousin Siegbert. From him he learnt the number and situation of the enemy.

'A goodly mustering,' he answered ; 'let us go forth to meet them. Thou sayest the plain of Tolbiac is a fair battle-field. So be it. Siegbert, take thou the command of the infantry, they are chiefly thine own men ; they will obey thee more implicitly. Myself will lead my valiant horsemen. Eight leagues from hence, is it ? Right glad am I it is so little distant. When the men and horses are refreshed, we will proceed at once.'

Four-and-twenty miles from Cologne, Chlovis and his allies arrived in the close neighbourhood of the plains of Tolbiac,

and here they found their ancient foes already drawn up. Proudly passed on the Franks, defiling on to the plain before the King, who smiled on them as they passed with words of commendation, encouragement, and assurances of victory.

And now face to face<sup>1</sup> stood two of the fiercest nations of Germany, mutually animated by the memory of past exploits and prospect of future greatness. The Alemanni covered two good thirds of the field of battle with their innumerable hosts, whilst Chlovis and Siegbert drew up their troops, well disciplined, well armed and trained in many a glorious battlefield, but certainly outnumbered by their adversaries. Chlovis rode along the front of his army, encouraging his men.

‘Fight for victory,’ he said, ‘and it will alight on our banner. Fight, comrades, for your wives and little ones. Think on the walls of Soissons; think on our fair and smiling plains. Shall they be the prey of the rude Alemanni? No; we will utterly destroy these howling wolves who would ravage our fair country, assuage their hunger with our harvests and cattle. Comrades, the only passage to Soissons is over our dead bodies. But the gods of our country fight on our side. They lead us on to victory!’

The shock of the two contending armies was terrible. The noise of it was like to the roar of thunder. They fought hand to hand and foot to foot. Chlovis had dashed upon the Alemanni with the flower of his cavalry, and had routed and put to flight the right wing of his enemy. But their left wing pressed hard upon Siegbert at the head of his Ripuarians and the rest of the Frank infantry, and gaining ground, steadily drove them back. In vain Chlovis charged their close ranks; in vain Aurelian, supported by Chararic at the head of his chosen body guard, brought up fresh supplies of cavalry. Still the Alemanni pressed onward, onward, and all the valour of the Franks of Soissons could achieve was to force themselves into their midst by dint of fierce fighting. Chlovis fought like a lion, covered with dust and blood, but still the enemy poured on, their number seeming never to diminish. At one moment

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon.

of the battle, Ethelbert, fighting near to the King, saw Siegbert of Cologne borne off the field desperately wounded.

‘Even so,’ said Chlovis, to whom he spurred with the news. ‘Seek Athanaric: thou and he force a passage to the Ripuarians, and charge the enemy back before them.’

This charge was in vain. Chlovis, wielding his fatal francisque with a power that cleared a path before him, now saw with dismay his own cavalry, at whose head rode Chararic, begin to waver and give way before the Alemanni. All seemed lost. Ragnacair of Cambray was down, Regnomer of Mans was severely wounded, the Antrusion fell bravely, fighting to the last, and many of the best warriors from the frontiers of Gaul were in bad or similar plight.

Then Chlovis suddenly remembered the words which Chlotildis had spoken to him. Smitten to the heart, he acknowledged that, in the absorbing nature of his duties as leader and organizer in such a battle, he had not only forgotten his promise to her, but in the fervour of his address to his warriors had even promised them victory in the name of their own gods. Lifting up his eyes to heaven, in this his dire extremity, he said, the tears of earnest prayer filling his eyes—

‘O Christ! Whom Chlotildis invokes as Son of the living God, I implore Thy succour! I have called upon my gods, and find they have no power. I therefore invoke Thee! I believe in Thee! Deliver me from mine enemies, and I will be baptized in Thy Name!’

At this moment Aurelian rode up with a fresh troop of horse, which he had succeeded in gathering together, persuading them to follow him. Chlovis put himself at their head, and swooped afresh upon the enemy, at the precise spot where the last King of the Alemanni was fighting at the head of his people. Loudly shouting his war cry, as much to animate his men as to cause panic to his enemy, Chlovis rushed upon him, and after a short but severe struggle, felled him to the ground. The Alemanni, dismayed with this disaster and the pertinacity of a foe who did not know when he was beaten, but returned again and again to the struggle, gave way. Many



fled in different directions, whilst others, closely pressed by the cavalry led by Ethelbert and his foster brother, threw down their arms and begged for quarter. A general slaughter took place in other parts of the field, and a hot pursuit of the fugitives, Chlovis having sworn to rout them so entirely they should never rally again.

The news of this great victory was sent to the Queen by the triumphant Chlovis, as well as the manner in which it had been obtained. She sent to tell Remigius the important tidings, asking him to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving, at which she would be present. At the interview which she held with the holy Prelate after these first fruits of gratitude had been offered, she told him of her wish to go and meet the returning King, as she should like to be the first to congratulate him on his double victory.

‘It is well said, my daughter. I myself will accompany thee on such an occasion of joy to the whole Church of Christ. We will go out to meet him with religious pomp and sacred hymns of triumph. It is meet that a conqueror so favoured by the Most High should be honoured by the Spouse of Christ, whose obedient son he will soon become.’

It was in Champagne that the meeting of the loving wife and the victorious warrior-King took place. Chlovis, riding up to her chariot in the long procession of priests and people coming to meet him, said to her—

‘Chlovis has vanquished the Alemanni, and thou hast vanquished Chlovis. The business thou hast so much at heart is done : my baptism can no longer be delayed.’

‘Thanks be to God,’ devoutly answered the Queen.<sup>2</sup> ‘To the Lord of Hosts are both these triumphs due !’

On his arrival at Soissons, the first care of Chlovis was to assemble all the chiefs and warriors in a Mallum, where he laid before them the step he was about to take, and his motives for it.

‘It was,’ he said, ‘when the battle was well nigh lost ; when my bravest warriors and brethern in arms were falling

<sup>2</sup> St. Gregory of Tours.

fast before the enemy, that I made the vow to worship henceforth only the Lord God of the Catholic Church. Judge, my valiant comrades, whether such a vow, at such a moment, followed by such fortunate results to us all, ought not to be paid most rigorously and without loss of time.'

Loud acclamations greeted this speech, and the shouts 'for the Lord Christ,' were heard by the Queen in her oratory, whither she had repaired, to supplicate God for her lord and King in this important meeting. When the shouts died away, they cried out with unanimous voice—

'My lord King,<sup>3</sup> to thy valour and thy piety we owe the victory. We abandon our mortal gods, and are ready to follow thy example and worship the immortal God Whom Remigius teaches!'

This was indeed an answer to the prayers of the pious Queen, and great were now the preparations for the important ceremony which it was thought best should take place on Christmas Day, rather than defer it till Easter. Remigius and Vedast of Toul instructed and prepared the catechumens, whilst many bishops repaired to Rheims in order to be present at this fulfilment of their most fervent prayers.

The efforts of their spiritual teachers were unremitting to prepare the hearts of these fierce warriors and soften them with sentiments of Christian meekness and humility. A great blessing attended their pious work. The King set them all an example of compunction and devotion, induced thereto by the gentle influence of his religious Queen, laying aside his regal state and prostrating himself, clothed in sackcloth, imploring day and night the divine mercy. Such conduct on the part of a chief for whom his warriors felt such enthusiastic devotion, had a great effect on them, calming their spirits and giving greater weight to the words of the holy ecclesiastics.

The long expected day at length drew near. The weather was so clear and bright, it seemed as if even the elements had agreed to second the efforts of the Queen to give a great external pomp to the sacred rite which should strike the

<sup>3</sup> St. Gregory of Tours.

senses of a barbarous people, and implant an awe and respect in their minds befitting the administration of a sacrament so important in its results to the future destinies of the great kingdom fast rising under the auspices of Chlovis. It was a double festival to celebrate—the glorious Nativity of Christ, the birth of the Sun of Justice, spreading light and life in the midst of darkness and death, and the birth to this light and life of those hitherto lost in the darkness of heathendom. All Rheims was alive with joyful anticipation. Never since the first Christmas Day, four hundred and ninety-six years before, had the great festival of the Nativity been more anxiously expected.

The streets leading from the palace—where the King had taken up his abode for the last few weeks—to the door of the cathedral, were hung with rich tapestry and carpets of various colours. The forests had been rifled to supply scarlet berries to twine with lustrous evergreens, hung everywhere in festoons and wreaths, or woven into myriads of sacred devices by the Gauls, to whose taste was always allotted the decorations on these occasions.

These decorations were in themselves a splendid sight in the bright morning sunshine of this long desired day. It was cold but dry. Snow had fallen in the night, and its myriad crystals sparkled in the sun, its virgin purity contrasting with the bright colours of the tapestries and the glossy green of the wreaths and garlands. The streets through which the procession was to pass were kept clear of foot passengers, but scaffolds and platforms, here and there erected, were crowded with spectators, as well as the tops of the houses, where the most daring had contrived to post themselves.

‘It is a most beautiful sight,’ said the Lady Marcia, all wrapped in furs, to a friend sitting beside her on a balcony overlooking the whole length of a street opening on the cathedral. ‘But have you been in the cathedral? It is lovely! it is gorgeous! I was admitted as an especial favour early this morning. All the pillars and arches are twined with holly and ivy, and the high altar is one mass of gold and jewels! As for

the baptistery, it passes all description ! It is carpeted with lovely green moss, kept down by branches of ivy fastened across. Ivy runs up all the pillars as if it grew there, and here the perfumed wax tapers are put, winding in the other direction. It will be like a wreath of fire when they are lit, before the procession enters. They say that the water in the font comes all the way from the Jordan, from the very spot where our Lord Christ was baptized. It was sent by the Princess Llantildis for the King's baptism, and arrived here last night.'

'Who are those going down the street?' asked the Lady Julia, sitting not far from her sister.

'Those,' said another lady, 'are the people who are to let the birds loose. Such a quantity of pigeons, all white, and some white doves. There would have been more doves, but the people who were bringing them from the south could not get through the snow. I am glad we have not so much snow as it appears they have at Lyons and Vienne.'

'Hark ! I hear the music of the procession,' said the Lady Marcia. 'Yes ; here they come. What a fine view we have right down the street. I do so like a grand sight like this !'

And grand it certainly was in every sense. Three thousand catechumens marched in procession, all dressed in white, carrying crosses in their hands, and singing litanies. A body of clergy walked at their head, with cross and banner displayed, sacred music swelling as they advanced in the sharp morning air. Then came the King, led by the right hand by the venerable Archbishop, clad in his robes and carrying his crozier, a true shepherd, leading his flock into the fold of his Master and Lord. The Queen followed, leading the young Prince Theodoric, and then the rest of the catechumens two and two, whilst on each side of them walked a long line of priests in white surplices and scarlet cassocks.

As they were about to enter the door of the cathedral, the Archbishop turned to the King and laid the end of his richly embroidered stole, symbol of the yoke of Christ, on his arm, that strong right arm, so often uplifted to fight the battles of the Church, now adopting him as her true son, whilst he

addressed to him words of holy exhortation to 'enter the temple of the Lord.' Followed by Chlovis and the rest, he preceded them to the holy font, amidst the soft strains of sacred music, and entered the baptistery, now as well as the interior of the cathedral a blaze of light, and redolent of the richest perfumes.

The ceremonies of the Church proceeded in the midst of a solemn silence pervading the vast assemblage, and the rapt attention of the Frank warriors, subdued into reverent awe. This feeling increased in intensity as the Archbishop, about to pour the consecrated water on the head of Chlovis, addressed to him these ever memorable words—

'Lower thy head,<sup>4</sup> meek Sicambrian! Burn what thou hast adored, and adore what thou hast burned;' whilst Chlovis bending his head over the sacred font, the Archbishop poured over it the regenerating water which cleansed his soul from sin.

At this moment a beautiful white dove—escaped perhaps before the time from its keepers—flew through the open window of the baptistery, and swooping down upon the altar, to which the Archbishop turned for the vial containing the holy chrism, rose again, and soaring on high through the chancel, disappeared from view. Scarcely interrupted by this slight incident, Remigius took the consecrated oil and anointed the King, signing him on the forehead as he knelt before him, thus enlisting him into the ranks of the army of the Lord of Hosts.

After the sacred rites had been administered to all the catechumens, they returned up the church in long procession, the triumphal chants of the clergy answered by the loud shouts of the multitude without, waving branches and flags, whilst martial music swelled high, and those who held the birds in cages set them free, saying—

'Soar towards heaven! souls of the redeemed of the Lord! Captives of sin no longer, washed in the pure water of Baptism, ransomed by His precious Blood!'

<sup>4</sup> St. Gregory of Tours.

The Sacrifice of the Mass was then offered ; wreaths of incense ascended in clouds, whilst the pealing strains of the *Gloria in excelsis* rose to the lofty arches, and the threefold *Sanctus* of the heavenly choir was re-echoed upon earth. Chlovis had deposited on the massive gold salver presented to him at the Offertory a munificent gift, in which glowed with ensanguined hues the fatal ornaments of coral, part of the price paid for the blood of the now glorified Iërne.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### *Faithful unto death.*

JEALOUS of the accession of power and influence which Chlovis obtained by the support of the Catholic Church, of which he was now the faithful son, Gundovald the Burgundian on the one side, and Alaric the Visigoth on the other, opposed and persecuted their Catholic subjects on all occasions. Chlovis at last took up arms in their defence against Gundovald, whom he totally defeated, and obliged to sign a treaty by which he was bound to extend in future complete immunity to them. But Chlovis had no sooner departed from Burgundy, than Gundovald fell upon Vienne, surprised the Frank garrison, slew his brother Godegesil, whom Chlovis had established there, at the foot of the altar, and sent the Frank captives, to the number of three thousand, to Alaric the Visigoth to dispose of at his pleasure. Alaric, fearing the wrath of Chlovis should he put them to death, settled them in the neighbourhood of Toulouse, giving them grants of land for the purpose. He gained nothing by such a proceeding with Chlovis, who, farther incensed by his oppressive treatment of the Bishop of Rhodéz, and others of the Catholic clergy of Aquitaine, determined to call him to account for this and all his former acts of treachery. It alarmed Alaric to hear that his old rival was arming for his punishment, and he sent to entreat Chlovis to grant him an interview, earnestly protesting that he would vindicate everything he had done, and prove his friendly disposition to the King of France in all things.

The conference was granted, and the place appointed for it was an island of the Loire, not far from Amboise. Thither Chlovis repaired, attended by the Prince Theodoric,

now twenty-one, and his brother Chlodomir, nearly twelve. Aurelian was there, now Lord of Melun, Chilperic the Merovingian, Ethelbert, raised to the dignity of Antrusion, and Athanaric, lately promoted as Graf of the towns ceded by the Armoricans in a new treaty, consenting to be no longer governed by a King, but by a duke, holding his duchy in allegiance to the King of France. Alaric had already arrived on the opposite bank of the Loire, accompanied by an equal number of picked warriors, and he could be seen through the trees waiting for the signal for both parties to take boats and cross over to the island at the same moment, a precaution judged necessary to prevent treachery on either side.

The noble river presented a beautiful sight that summer evening of the year 507. The broad and placid water glowed in the rays of the declining sun, disturbed only by the swift dip of the swallow's wing, skimming its surface in search of the insects darting in and out of the reeds and bulrushes, a mazy circle, ever broken by the predatory bird, yet ever renewed. Large trees clothed the high banks, confining the river in its due bounds, their branches overhanging deep pools, where swam the fish leaping to snatch their evening meal, whilst in the distance rose the spire and tower of Amboise, glinting back from many a point the bright sunbeams reflected from their metal surfaces.

The two parties met in seeming amity on the island. Alaric protested, swore that he only punished the Catholics as traitors conspiring against him, and finally signed a treaty by which he bound himself to all the demands of Chlovis. A splendid collation, to which all sat down, terminated the proceedings, the best part of the adventure, as Athanaric afterwards observed to Ethelbert; 'unless,' he added, 'he furnish us soon with the opportunity of a fight.'

It was not long before this opportunity arrived. Once out of the presence of his dreaded rival, Alaric broke all his oaths, set the treaty at defiance, and no longer concealed his jealous fury with his Catholic subjects. He took so much pains to interrupt all correspondence of the Catholics of Aquitaine with



those of France, that he was not a little terrified to hear that Chlovis knew all he had been doing, and was on his way to punish him for his double treachery.

At a Mallum which Chlovis summoned for the purpose, he laid before the Princes and warriors the letters of the Catholics, and demanded their aid in the expedition he had determined to make into Aquitaine. To this they willingly agreed; 'as,' so said Chilperic the Merovingian, 'the wrath of God would not fail to visit us if we left the children of a Church of which we are the chosen sons and protectors, to perish miserably at the hands of an Arian. Let us proceed at once to their rescue, and transfer them to thy power and government; so that the Church in Aquitaine may enjoy peace and prosperity.'

'It does grieve me,'<sup>1</sup> said the King, 'those Arians still possess the fairest portion of Gaul. Let us march against them, with the grace of God, and having vanquished these heretics, we will possess and divide the fertile provinces of Aquitaine, restore to the Church her lands, and re-establish peace and justice in the midst of that much harassed people.'

The assembly<sup>2</sup> unanimously applauded the generous design of their monarch, expressed their resolution to conquer or die, since both would be equally profitable, and solemnly protested that they would never shave their beards till victory absolved them from that vow.

The promise of rescue to the persecuted Catholics was a source of the deepest gratitude to the pious Queen. She pressed the King to make some pious foundation to propitiate the divine favour in his enterprise, a most fitting preparation, she said, for a powerful Catholic King to make on the eve of his departure to fight the enemies of Christ.

To this proposition the King readily assented, and on his way to see the holy Geneviève, for whom he entertained an especial reverence, and whom he generally sought for pious counsel, he suddenly stopped, and asked the Queen whether that was not the spot she had spoken of as best fitted for the site of a church. On her replying in the affirmative, 'Then,'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

said he, darting his battle-axe with a skilful and nervous hand, 'on that spot where my francisque shall fall, will I erect a church in honour of the holy Apostles.'<sup>4</sup>

Chlovis, at the head of his army, was delayed by the ambassadors of Theodoric of Ravenna, charged to mediate between the contending powers. Chlovis, in deference to a monarch for whom he entertained the highest esteem, consented to listen to their plea for Alaric, though he assured them that as he was firmly engaged to support the cause of the Catholic Church, and rescue the Catholics from destruction, he could not listen to their proposals.

Near Tours he sent Ethelbert and Athanaric to the church of St. Martin, with a charge to bring him back the words that they should hear on entering, as he would take them for an omen as to the success of his expedition.

Arrived at the porch of the church, the friends dismounted, and gave the bridles of their horses to some beggars who were standing near soliciting the arms of the faithful as they came in and out of the church.

'Pray for a good omen, friends,' said Ethelbert, giving a handful of coins to the well pleased truands,<sup>5</sup> as he and his foster brother entered the sacred building, where they heard the chanting or psalterium within. The first words which greeted their ears were well fitted to satisfy the King, for thus sang the choristers—'Thou hast endued me with strength for the wars. Thou hast supplanted those that have risen up against me. Thou hast put mine enemies to flight, and exterminated those that hated me.'<sup>6</sup>

These words, reported to Chlovis, filled his heart with joyful gratitude, and inspired confidence in the ranks of his army, where he was regarded as a 'second Joshua,' 'a new Gideon,' going forth to battle against the enemies of the Lord, to whom victory was promised by a direct message from God.

They crossed the bridge at Orleans, which afforded an easy passage for the whole army. But whilst yet forty miles

<sup>4</sup> Afterwards burnt, rebuilt, and consecrated to Notre Dame de Paris.

<sup>5</sup> Beggars—truants.

<sup>6</sup> Giffard's *History of France*.

from Poitiers, they were suddenly arrested in their further progress on the banks of the Vigemna, a tributary of the Loire, greatly swollen by the heavy rains which had recently fallen in the neighbourhood. This was the more trying as the army of Alaric was to be seen encamped on the opposite side.

'It is most vexatious,' said the King, as, the twilight closing in, he, Aurelian, and the officers of his own body guard, rode up and down the banks of the river, seeking to discover a ford where the army might pass. 'But for this untoward event, we might have crossed swords this afternoon. It is most discouraging to the men, with the enemy full in view. Even if we had leisure or material to form a bridge, I doubt if we could construct it in the face of such an army.'

'It is vexatious,' answered Aurelian, 'especially as report says their council is at variance. Some are anxious to crush us at once, others to give us the slip and await us farther south. Could we but attack them in this divided state, success, it seems, were easy.'

'I most devoutly hope they do not meditate escape,' exclaimed the King. 'The sight of the enemy has filled our troops with ardour for the combat, by which it would be most advantageous to profit. Besides, we cannot afford to wait. The presence of two such armies in close proximity will soon exhaust the country of provisions. We are short as it is.'

Ethelbert, looking earnestly at the river as if inwardly praying that some miracle might be vouchsafed in their favour, suddenly saw to the right of the place where they were standing, a tall, slender figure in white robes emerge from amongst the trees on the bank a little higher up, passing over the river, and beckoning him to follow. His face paled with emotion and rapt joy as he recognised the beautiful countenance of his beloved Ierne, radiant with the same lovely smile which illumined it in death. 'Come, my beloved,' he thought he heard her say, 'come, follow me. Here shalt thou pass to rejoin me in glorious death.'

'My lord, my lord,' he exclaimed in an ecstasy of joy; 'the ford, the ford; see, she is crossing. The water scarce reaches her slender ancles.'

'Where?' asked the King, breathless with the excitement which Ethelbert's manner and announcement had produced in him.

'There, my lord,' said Aurelian, whilst Ethelbert stood gazing with adoring joy at the figure of his beloved lady. 'Do you not see that beautiful white hart,<sup>7</sup> down there by the trees to the right? The water does indeed scarce flow above her slender fetlocks.'

'By the holy Martin of Tours, and so it is,' exclaimed the King. 'Now, thanks be to the Lord of Hosts Who vouchsafes us such a guide.'

'Now she goes up the bank,' said Athanaric. 'By the rim of my shield, but where she crosses we can cross also.'

The King, striking spurs into his horse, galloped up to the place where the white hart had first appeared, followed by his retinue.

'It is a direct interference of the Divine Providence in our favour,' he said, as they carefully explored the ford thus marvellously revealed to them.

'It is equal to the passage of the whole army, lord King,' said Athanaric, triumphantly, as passing and repassing the ford, he splashed the shallow water beneath the hoofs of his horse. Ethelbert was silent, he saw that no one but himself had recognized in this divine emissary the form of her who was never absent from his thoughts, and whom he felt certain he was now about to join in a glorious death.

'Push on, push on, you of the vanguard,' cried an officer, galloping up, as some hours later, having crossed the ford, they found the Visigoths in full retreat before them.' 'My lord,' he said, addressing the Antrusion Ethelbert, 'the King's orders are that we push on all night, till we come up with the enemy. You will engage him, as soon as you can, at all risks, and prevent his escape.'

These orders were received with a joyous 'hurrah' from the men and a clashing of shields which must have startled the retreating Visigoths and struck them with alarm.

<sup>7</sup> Gibbon.

'We might see them,' groaned Athanaric, 'if the night were not so dark. I marvel it is not lighter, seeing it is so cold, and the night so clear.'

Even as he spoke, a bright white light suddenly burst over the advancing Franks, illuminating the country round with a vivid blaze, in which the smallest object was as visible as at noon day.

'What in the name of the Saints, can that be?' he exclaimed, startled by this sudden blaze. Both he and Ethelbert looked up as he spoke, and there above the cathedral of Poitiers, hovering in mid air, hung a flaming meteor, not only guiding the army with its friendly light, but also revealing the dense ranks of the Visigoths not many miles ahead of them. 'By the Cross of Christ!' he exclaimed in his excitement, 'it is like the column of fire that guided the Israelites in the desert, only that we are pursuing the Egyptians instead of flying before them.'

Early the next morning, the advanced guard of the Franks came up with the rear guard of the Visigoths, and instantly attacked them. For a moment their rout seemed certain, so great was the disorder and confusion of their retreat, so great was their terror when they found themselves overtaken at such a disadvantage. Gaining the more open plain of Vouglé, they rallied and attacked the Franks as they came up, those who had so clamourously demanded the battle being determined not to survive the ignominy of flight. Soon the fighting became desperate, for the Visigoth's numbers did not decrease, but ever came pouring in to fill up the breaches made in their ranks.

'Cheer up, comrades,' said Chlovis, who had fought his way through to a part of the battle where he had espied symptoms of wavering; the men being really overborne with numbers. 'Never mind their hosts. Remember they are Arians, and Christ is our Commander. Courage! remember He is with us; remember your past glory and renown. Victory awaits our fortitude, and the same good fortune which has so often crowned your martial valour with success.'

These words from a leader they regarded as little less than a demi-god, infused new courage into the hearts of his warriors almost fainting with fatigue and loss of blood. They renewed the battle with so much fury that the Visigoths were obliged to yield in their turn.

Towards the close of the day the advantage of the Franks was everywhere manifest, though victory had not yet pronounced in their favour. It was at this juncture that Chlovis espied, not far from him, his rival Alaric, who had contrived all day to elude his repeated attempts to approach near enough to engage him in single combat. The King of the Visigoths was so absorbed rallying his yielding troops, that he was quite unconscious of the proximity of his dreaded foe. Chlovis saw the moment was come for a decisive blow, and spurring his horse to meet him, challenged him to the fight with bitter reproaches.

‘But it is chiefly thy treachery to the unfortunate Syagrius,’ he said, ‘that I mean to chastise this day. For this act of niddingswerth<sup>8</sup> alone shouldst thou pay with thy life’s forfeit, were that the only treachery of thy base life.’

Stung by the bitter contempt of the tone in which these words were uttered, Alaric turned and flew upon his foe. A furious duel took place between these two men, who had been rivals from youth. Once more the superior fortune of Chlovis prevailed, for the doomed Arian King of the Visigoths fell beneath the powerful arm of the first Catholic King of France.<sup>9</sup>

Ethelbert, seeing the struggle, and uncertain as to its termination, made desperate attempts to reach the spot. Attacked in his turn by some of the Visigoths to create a diversion in favour of their King, he was obliged to defend himself. Athanaric, as usual fighting near his friend, saw the fall of the Visigoth King, and his exclamation of triumph made Ethelbert look up just at the moment when two Visigoths sprang upon Chlovis, determined to avenge the death of their

<sup>8</sup> Cowardice.

<sup>9</sup> The ancient name of Gaul was changed by Chlovis into France.

leader. Ethelbert, seeing these fearful odds, shook off his opponents, and, urging his horse with voice and spur, rushed to the rescue of the King. Athanaric followed him, and the two fell upon the Visigoths, whom the King resolutely held at bay, despite all the fatigue of body and mind which he had undergone. But for this opportune intervention it might have gone hard with Chlovis in this unequal combat.

‘That for thy insolence in drawing sword upon our King,’ shouted Athanaric, thrusting his spear at one of the Visigoths. It glanced off the shield of his enemy and fell on the flank of the King’s horse. Maddened by the sudden wound the horse reared, and, despite all the efforts of the rider, sprang forwards and rushed away with him to some distance from the spot, where the two friends soon disposed of his assailants.

Chlovis forced his horse to return to the scene of the struggle, where he found both the Visigoths had paid for their temerity. But Athanaric was kneeling on the ground, supporting Ethelbert in his arms, fast bleeding from a sword thrust in his breast.

Grief and dismay filled the heart of Chlovis at this sight. Dismounting, he knelt down and took the hand of Ethelbert as it lay powerless on the ground. He looked into his eyes, his own now dim with fast rising emotion.

‘My noble comrade,’ he said, ‘has the price of my safety been the loss of thy life? Alas! that such a misfortune should be permitted to dim the glory of this great victory.’

‘Athanaric, what is this?’ cried Aurelian, as he rode up hastily to the spot. ‘The King dead! Heaven forbid such a dreadful thing!’

‘No, my brave Aurelian!’ answered Chlovis. ‘The mercy of the King of Kings has preserved my poor life for the benefit of all my people. It is my noble Antrusion, my comrade Ethelbert, who has paid, I fear, the forfeit for my safety.’

‘Ethelbert!’ exclaimed Aurelian. ‘My brother! Gracious Lord Christ! Thou hast permitted him that he should be called to his rest in Thee! My lord, I beseech your Highness, leave him to me. Your death is reported in the field. Go, I

entreat you ! Show yourself to your warriors and allies, ere the Visigoths rally at the thought that you are no more. Nay, my lord ! I beseech you ! Think how many lives, and even this great victory, you risk !' remonstrated Aurelian, seeing how reluctant the King was to leave the dying comrade he had so long known and valued.

Chlovis yielding to these earnest entreaties, at last consented to depart. Aurelian kneeling down beside Ethelbert, now reviving a little, spoke anxiously to Ethelbert, receiving his answers in tones so faint and low, that none but his eager ear could have heard the words.

'I do,' he heard him say, 'firmly and steadfastly hold to the Cross of Christ the Lord, deeply bewailing my sins, which can only be effaced by His most precious Blood !'

As if exhausted by the effort of speaking, Ethelbert lay back motionless in the arms of Athanaric, gazing down into his face with mute anguish of soul. Both he and Aurelian thought him dead, his eyes were closed, and he lay so still they might well think that all was over. Suddenly he looked up, half rose from the arms of Athanaric, and with a radiant expression of serene joy in his eyes, he exclaimed in tones of the utmost tenderness and adoration—

'Iërne ! Iërne ! peerless and beloved maiden, art thou come to fetch me ? Hovering there in thy white robes, thy dark hair floating beneath a crown of glory ! O Iërne, Iërne ! thine for ever ! to be with thee in the glory of Christ the Lord for evermore !'

These words were unintelligible to the amazed listeners, for strange to them was the language in which he had uttered them. It was in Armorican that he had spoken, but the tone and the expression were not to be mistaken by the King, who, as soon as his presence had dispelled the fears of his followers, had returned with speed to the place where, the moment afterwards, the noble Ethelbert expired, 'faithful unto death.'

When it could no longer be denied that all was over, the King gave orders to the Franks, now coming up fast at the mournful tidings, to gather up a number of spears and form a



litter, placing them crosswise and fastening them together. On this military bier they placed the body of the dead warrior, the shield of the white ermine beneath his head.

‘Bear him to the city of Tours,’ said the King. ‘He shall be buried in the church of the holy Martin. That valiant soldier will not object to the company of so brave a warrior as my noble Ethelbert. Farewell, valiant comrade! I shall visit thee often whilst life is spared me. After death may I see thee again, where the holy Remigius says there will be no more leave-taking.’

The clergy of Paris came out to meet the King on his triumphant return from Toulouse, where he had been received by the acclamations of the Catholic clergy, and where he had left a colony of Frank warriors, to whom he had delegated the easy task of subduing the remainder of the Visigoths, now driven back into Spain. A narrow sea coast from the Rhone to the Pyrenees, called Septimania, was all that they were suffered to retain, whilst the fruitful province of Aquitaine was indissolubly united to the kingdom of France from the last mentioned mountains to the banks of the Loire. The timely appearance of Theodoric of Ravenna, armed for the defence of his widowed daughter and infant grandson, stayed the further progress of the victorious Chlovis, who had no wish to measure swords with a brother-in-law for whom he had so much respect, and secured a small remnant and a not disadvantageous treaty for those he felt bound to protect.

Chlovis was busily engaged one bright morning in the June of 510 watching the progress of the church he had vowed to erect, and for which he furnished the money out of the royal treasury, when Athanaric, now raised to the dignity of Antrustion, and promoted to the military guard of Paris, rode up to him.

‘My lord the King,’ he said to Chlovis, ‘there is a messenger come from Toulouse, preceding, he says, an embassy from Anastasius, the Emperor of the East. It is headed by Prince Sigismer, bearer of a message from that illustrious quarter of high import to thyself. He has only distanced the embassy by

a few hours. Will it please thee we make some fitting preparation to receive it?’

It was at a Mallum hastily convened of all his chiefs and warriors within reach of his summons that Chlovis received the embassy of the Emperor of the East,<sup>10</sup> courting his alliance against Theodoric of Ravenna, and bringing the titles and ornaments of ‘Patrician, Consul, and Augustus,’ to his valiant brother Chlovis, the conqueror of Alaric, the founder of a mighty nation, as tokens of his lasting amity and profound admiration for his qualities as a great ruler and warrior.

It was decided that the ceremony of investiture with the Imperial insignia should take place in the church of St. Martin at Tours, the King being desirous to offer this new token of respect to the soldier-saint, to whose intercession in his behalf he firmly believed he entirely owed his success in arms. The King farther prayed his best friend and counsellor, the venerable Remigius, to be with him on this important occasion. ‘And,’ he continued to the venerable Prelate, ‘I should much wish to make a suitable thankoffering to God, Who has so much favoured me, and filled me with so great riches, honour, and renown—I wish it to be even the greatest I could make! Venerable Father, would it not be acceptable in the sight of Him to Whom I owe so much, were I to dedicate my kingdom to Him?’ There is that magnificent crown, “the Realm,”<sup>11</sup> which I took in the treasury at Toulouse; I would send it as a token of that dedication to our Holy Father the Pope Hormisdas, to be placed by him in the church of the holy Apostles at Rome—the head and centre of the Catholic Church<sup>12</sup> throughout the world. It should go under charge of my cousin Chilperic, and my valiant Antrustion Athanaric, and a suitable escort. My valiant kinsman Sigismer, on his return to the East, would doubtless make one with them in the matter of the presentation.’

Nor had the devout and pious Queen Chlotildis been forgotten by the Emperor Anastasius on this auspicious occa-

<sup>10</sup> Gibbon.

<sup>11</sup> St. Gregory of Tours.

<sup>12</sup> Alban Butler, *St. Chrysostom*; also *Life of St. Chlotildis*.

sion. His ambassadors were charged with a precious gift for her, even a piece of the true Cross, that sacred Wood, adorned with gold and precious stones, and inclosed in a rich shrine. There was also a book of the Four Gospels, beautifully illuminated, most welcome gifts to the saintly Queen, and she decided that they also should be presented as a thankoffering, at the shrine of the holy Martin, on the same day on which her august lord would be invested with the dignity of the Roman purple.

Extensive preparations were made to give splendour to such a pageant as had not been witnessed since the glorious days of the Roman Empire. The streets of Tours were hung in all their length with rich carpets and brilliant tapestries, covered with the choicest flowers from Aquitaine and the royal conservatories of Toulouse. The streets were bright with the magnificent dresses of the ladies, anxious to do honour to so high and solemn an occasion as the procession of the blessed relic through the centre of the fortunate city. Every heart beat high with expectation when the distant sound of martial music, succeeded by sacred chant, told that the procession had left the gates of the palace. First came the Frank guard under the command of Hermanfrid, glittering with lustrous arms, and carrying standards taken from the Visigoths and Burgundians. Then came chariots containing ladies, preceding that of the Princess Llantildis, an expression of sweet grace and chastened happiness on her countenance, from which the years had taken no beauty, though they had added a matronly dignity and a bearing befitting the wife of a valiant warrior. On each side of her chariot rode the Frank guards, whilst the ladies of the Queen came next, amongst whom were Fritigel and Gunhilda, now the happy wives of the Antrusion Athanaric and the Graf Hermanfrid. Then came the Queen in a chariot of gold, drawn by two white mules, caparisoned with purple and white housings, all of silk. Her beautiful face showed scarcely any trace of the passing years, save the deepened humility and heavenly resignation imprinted there, and a meek joy, crowning her lovely brow with a crown, not even surpassed by the

splendid coronet she wore. On one side of her chariot rode Theodoric, and on the other his half-brother Theodomin. After these came the officers of the palace, followed by the Grafs and Antrustions from their different commands. Next rode Athanaric and Chilperic the Merovingian, Aurelian and Prince Sigismer immediately preceding the King, followed by a long train of the principal clergy of the diocese, and the Archbishop Remigius, in splendid cope and mitre. After him came six young girls, dressed in white, scattering rose leaves. One of these girls, all of them noble, was the young Merovingian Princess, her luxurious fair hair floating on her shoulders from beneath her veil and the chaplet of roses, which, in common with her young companions, she wore on this occasion. Acolytes, in scarlet and white, swung censers in front of a shrine, an ark of gold, richly chased, and set with precious stones, borne on the shoulders of four bishops by means of gold poles headed with fleur-de-lys, and passed through rings at the corners of the ark containing the reliquary and its precious contents. A body of armed Franks closed the procession, whilst after them poured a body of the people, following in devout reverence in the track of 'the True Wood.'

When they entered the church, the King took his seat on the throne prepared for him, the Queen sitting also enthroned on his left side. The officers, guards, and people, as many as could find room, entered from the north and south doors, and took the places allotted to them. When these arrangements were complete, the clergy bearing the shrine entered the church, singing as they wound slowly up the nave the hymn *Vexilla Regis*, composed for that especial occasion by a learned and pious ecclesiastic then on a visit of devotion to the tomb of the blessed Martin.<sup>13</sup>

The reliquary, with its sacred contents, was then taken out of the shrine by the Archbishop and deposited on the high altar. Prince Sigismer then presented to him the Imperial diadem,<sup>14</sup> a cap of silk, concealed by a profusion of pearls and jewels, the crown formed by a horizontal circle and two arches

<sup>13</sup> Alban Butler, *Life of St. Radegunde*.

<sup>14</sup> Gibbon.

of gold. At the summit of this crown, at the point of intersection of the arches, was placed a cross of gold, and two lappets of pearls on each side. This magnificent emblem of Imperial authority the venerable Prelate also placed on the altar, whilst Prince Sigismer awaited near him the approach of the King of France, who had descended from the dais. Mounting the steps of the altar, and standing beside the Archbishop, Chlovis was invested by the Prince Sigismer with the purple tunic and mantle. He next proceeded to clothe his right leg with the purple buskin, Aurelian and Chilperic the Merovingian performing that office for the left.<sup>15</sup> Chlovis then, kneeling before the Archbishop, was anointed and solemnly crowned with the Imperial diadem by his consecrated hands, and the Emperor of France, again standing on the steps of the altar, was saluted, by the vociferous shouts of the people assembled, 'Consul and Augustus.'

The Queen, rising in her turn, descended from the dais, and kneeling down on the cushion placed for that purpose, was crowned by the Archbishop, and saluted by him as Empress of France. When the shouts which hailed this ceremony also died away, the Emperor and Empress resumed their seats. A solemn silence then pervaded the building, whilst the Sacrifice of the Mass was offered by the Archbishop, whilst chant and solemn music swelled beneath the vaulted roof.

The Emperor and Empress returned through the streets of Tours, wending their way to the cathedral, where a *Te Deum* was to be sung. This time they rode side by side, crowned, and in a magnificent quadriga, drawn by four horses abreast, pawing and tossing their heads as they went along, as if conscious what high and mighty personages they bore through the streets. The Emperor scattered gold and silver as the chariot advanced, amidst the cries and shouts of 'Augustus!' 'Augusta!' which arose on all sides from the enraptured Gauls, as if the golden days of the mighty Roman Empire had once more, for them, arisen in their glory.

<sup>15</sup> Gibbon.

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